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THE PAYMENT.

BY ELEANOR M. INGRAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE DECISION.

"IT will last," stated Allard, "about six months. Afterward——"

His brother looked at him helplessly.

"Afterward?" he echoed drearily.

"Afterward there must be more. It is not possible, simply *is not*, for poverty to approach Theodora and Aunt Rose. Look around you, Robert."

Under the clear California moonlight the jade-green lawns and terraces dropped one below the other to the distant road. Through them writhed the long serpentine drive and paths, dotted over them stood dark masses of flowering bushes or trees with here and there the snowy gleam of a statue; over all floated the rhythmic tinkle of the central fountain. Untroubled calm was the spirit of the place; hereditary comfort.

"I have looked so often, Gerald. Yet, I find nothing."

"We must find, not a little money, but a fortune, and we must find it within six months," Allard answered, his low voice just reaching his listener. "There is no way to earn that, we know. Inside the law there are ways to acquire it. Wall Street affairs, for instance; a new popular song or two, an inexplicable conjuring trick, or a fresh breakfast food. But we have no such talents, you and I; we are just the ordinary gentlemen of leisure and *dilettante*. We are useless within limits. Outside the law——"

"Go on."

"You are not dismayed?"

Robert flung out his hands in an eloquent gesture.

"Gerald, nothing dismays me except the thought of pain to Theo and her mother. Go on."

"There is a way I have seen to make enough money to thrust poverty out of sight forever, and in less time than we have to command. It is by what the world calls a crime as ugly as forgery. Either of us can carry it through, but the one who undertakes it steps out of life as we know it. Our government is very clever and very strong, one who breaks the law can scarcely hope to escape arrest sooner or later; and if that happens our world must never guess. Whoever undertakes the work must leave here for an indefinite journey abroad; and in New York lay aside absolutely his identity. The one who goes must bear without aid what may occur; the one who stays——"

"Go on."

"The one who stays," he finished gently, "must not interfere or try to save."

Robert shuddered slightly and sat still for an instant.

"Shall we draw lots?" he questioned steadily. "Or will you let me go?"

Allard slipped impulsively from the veranda rail and came to sit on the arm of the other's chair.

"We've always played together, dear old fellow; the two years' difference between us got lost pretty early. School and college and the few years since; we did it all together, Bertie. But we have got to learn to go alone. And as for choosing our rôles now, the decision is not ours. Theodora," he paused. "Theodora cares for one of us. Aunt Rose admitted so much. Of course that one is the one who stays. You see I am just taking it for granted that we both love her. We have never talked about it, but we both knew, I think."

Robert laid a hand over the one on his shoulder, saying nothing. Allard's clasp tightened.

"If you ask her to-night or to-morrow, we will abide by the answer, will we not?" he insisted. "I think I am sure what it will be; you will not try to keep me?"

"You ask her, Gerald," Robert exclaimed vehemently. "I cannot, I will not. Oh, if she were less delicate, less fastidiously reared; less unfit to endure hardship! If we could fight it out, you and I!"

"Hush, hush; this *is* the fight. We are paying the penalty of being competent for no better battle, that is all."

"We could take care of ourselves."

"Without doubt, or starve decently. But we have to take care of some one else."

"Gerald, let me go."

"Play fair, Bertie."

"Gerald——"

"And Theo?"

The younger dropped his head against the other's knee.

Far down the avenue sounded the vibrating throb of an automobile; over it floated gay ringing voices and laughter. Through the night air pierced the long crescendo wail of a horn, startling the insect choirs into silence and waking a sleepy bird in the vines.

As the sounds grew rapidly nearer, Robert rose to his feet.

"Ask her, Gerald," he implored. "We may be wrong."

"If I must. But I think we are right."

The other turned toward the house door as the car swung into the drive. Allard went down the wide steps to meet the guests.

"The most delightful time," pealed the sweet high voice of a girl, above the din of the halted automobile. "Good night, Mrs. Preston. Until to-morrow, Sue and Billy. Oh, you, Gerald!"

"Come over to-morrow, Allard," called the merry chorus. "Don't forget the hunt." "Bring Robert." "*Adios.*"

"I am so tired," sighed the girl on the steps, gathering up her shimmering skirts and throwing back the hood of her cloak. "Mama has gone to bed, Gerald? Oh, and I do want some tea."

"Sit down here, my lady."

"You will bring me some?"

"Wait only."

She sank into a chair laughing and commenced to draw off her long gloves, watching as he moved to the little tea-table in a nook of the veranda.

When he brought the cup she extended a slim jeweled hand to receive it. Theodora had a somewhat Oriental taste; odors of sandalwood and rose breathed from her laces, her white wrist sparkled with slender bracelets, and the high comb in her blond hair held the glint of gems.

"I would say you were adorable, if you did not already know it," she assured him. "Why are you so serious to-night?"

"I had something to tell you, I think."

She waved a commanding spoon.

"Then sit down and begin."

But he remained silent for a while, regarding her. The excitement of the future had fallen away, leaving only the ugliness; and he was held by a curious prescience that this was the last night.

"Robert is not up?" she queried presently.

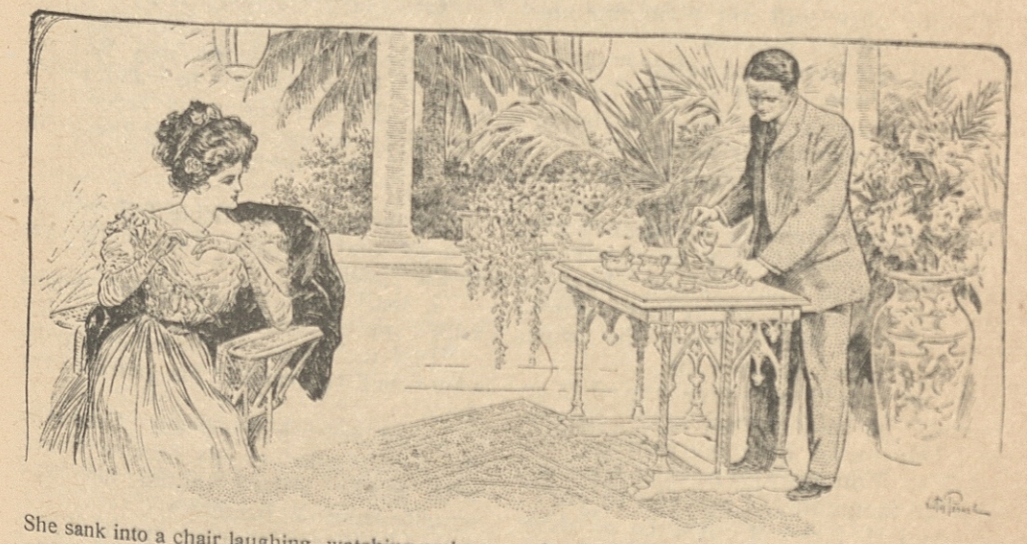
"No. Are you sorry, Theodora?"

Surprised at the tone, she glanced up, but the shadows were heavy where he sat.

"Why, yes, of course." And recovering herself. "Certainly; how could one exist without him?"

"How, indeed?" he echoed, almost too quietly. "If he were to go away——"

"I would expire with *ennui*. You see, he and I have a bond of frivolity; against you we all lean for support. You are *very* supporting, Gerald; now, this tea," she laughed gleefully, "Robert would probably have insisted on champagne. But what were you going to tell me?"



She sank into a chair laughing, watching as he moved to the little tea-table in a nook of the veranda.

"That I am going on a trip to South America; part business, part restlessness."

"You!"

"Why not? I may be gone only a few months, or—much more. But, surely you know Robert loves you, Theo; if I should not be home before you are married, still you will understand how much good I wish you both. Forgive me for speaking of this; it is because I start to-morrow."

She remained very still.

"I did not know you meant that," she said at last, her accents unsure.

"Or you would not have confessed? Never mind my interference, little cousin; I have no wish so dear as to have you two care for each other. You are not angry?"

She rose abruptly to set down her cup, the shadows her cloak now.

"Angry? Oh no; I have never learned to be angry with you. I—— It is damp out here, I must go in. Good night, Gerald."

"Good night, Theo," he responded with all gentleness. It was so wonderful, this exquisite timidity; this virginal shyness that only Robert should have seen. He saw her quivering as she passed him in the moonlight, her head averted.

But in the doorway she turned again.

"Gerald, Mr. Preston bade me tell you that he had seen a dangerous character loitering around the avenue; a man named Desmond who has just served a term in prison for counterfeiting."

"Thank you, dear," he answered calmly.

She slipped through the door hurriedly, as if in escape, ruthlessly tear-

ing her fragile gown upon the latch. Allard rested his head wearily against the column behind him, and so remained.

At the end of an hour he rose and went down across the moon-blanched lawns, walking quietly and directly toward the long road.

CHAPTER II.

THE KEY TO THE DOOR.

"Desmond, Desmond, you have not killed them?"

"I have not," answered the voice just touched with Irish softness. "But I am thinking they will not come up until dusk. Birdshot scatters."

"The rest have gone safely?"

"They have. And if you had not slipped through that hole in the old floor and broken your ankle——"

The man on the rough couch raised himself on his elbow. Fever lent an artificial brightness to his firm, young face and troubled gray eyes, the waving chestnut hair clung boyishly around a forehead which had acquired one straight line between the brows during the last five months.

"You should not have stayed, Desmond," he said earnestly. "You cannot help me; I have my own way out of this. You must go now, at least, and try the mountain. I ask you to go."

"And if I do, it must be at dusk. Look out that door; not a cloud or a shadow—and me with a hundred yards of bare mountainside to cross. Lie easy, sir."

"Desmond!"

"Oh, 'tis a word slipped. We are different enough for it to come to my tongue in the rush."

Allard sank back on the pillow and his gaze went unseeingly out the open door.

"Desmond," he said slowly, "you know; the only one who does. I had to trust you, at first; now I could trust you anyhow. After I am—captured," a curious expression flickered across his face, "no matter how things happen, I shall say nothing of you or the others, but carry my part through. You, at all times, will remember that I am just Leroy?"

"I will," the big man replied laconically. He was watching the one narrow path to the house.

"It would not help you to speak, Desmond; it would only bring more uproar and attention. You yourself do not want your western record known and connected with here. If you escape you will be a rich man; leave me my secret—I will have nothing else."

"I will. There's one around that big boulder down there; will I have to shoot birdseed at his legs, I wonder?"

"Not if you can avoid."

"Oh, I'm not playing at it, rest easy. And don't worry for fear they'll be thinking it you; when they find me gone and you not able to stand, they'll know. I'll put the guns beyond the possibility of your reaching them, sir, before I go to-night."

"No!"

The swift monosyllable fell with an energy that brought Desmond's eyes to the speaker.

"I shall want my revolver," Allard added more quietly. "I might need it."

"Just so," assented the other a trifle oddly, and returned to his guard of the door.

There was a long silence. Gradually the fluffily piled clouds became tinged with gold. Allard turned his head wearily from the brightness.

Suddenly the roaring crash of the bird-gun set the cottage vibrating and echoed repeatedly among the cliffs.

"'Tis only to frighten them," reassured Desmond, as his companion started up. "But I doubt they will wait past dusk."

"You will go?"

"I need dusk more than they; still, it won't be long. You—will I get you water—you moved too quick——"

"It is nothing," he drank gratefully from the tin dipper, then searched the hard face anxiously. "You will keep silence?"

"I will," said Desmond for the third time, and walked back to the door with his peculiar slouching gait.

"It's growing dark," he said, after a while. "I'm thinking they'll be making a rush pretty soon. If I could take you, instead of having to climb with hands and feet like a cat!"

"Impossible. You should have gone with the rest instead of being here now," he held out his hot hand for the other's clasp. "Good-by, Desmond. Without you this thing would never have worked at all."

"'Tis not so. Many a time has this game been tried and fallen through half way; and 'tis not thousands are made at it. *You* did it, with the gentleman's brain and knowledge and wit. Not that it matters now."

"Not very much. You are forgetting my revolver."

"No, I am not forgetting. You will not need it." He turned away to add the last one to the pile of weapons in the opposite corner.

Allard rose on his arm, his eyes flashing wide and keen.

"You have no idea of what I need, Desmond. Give me that revolver."

"You would shoot no one, and small use would it be."

"Desmond, we have been friends; give me that."

"I can't," he answered sullenly.

"Why not?"

"Because I know for what you want it, sir."

Allard flung back his head and confronted the defiant face opposite.

"And if so, is it your affair? You, who know from where I come and where I am going, you will interfere? You are wasting our time; give me my revolver, and go."

But the other made no move, although sending an anxious glance through the doorway.

"One gets out of prison," he said obstinately, "as I've found, myself. But what you mean—there's no coming back. You are over young for that, sir."

"You have been paid for helping me," Allard retorted, his voice savage with pain, "not for teaching me philosophy. Go take your liberty, if you can, and leave me mine. There is one door out for me, and one key. I trusted you; I might have kept the thing with me if I had imagined this."

Desmond flushed, but turned coolly.

"I'll go, 'tis time. If I was paid for helping, I gave the help. I never was paid for this you are asking."

"Desmond, Desmond, you leave me so!"

He turned on the threshold, a square uncouth figure against the violet twilight.

"I'd never do it," he said quite gently, "if I didn't know you'd thank me some day."

"Desmond——"

"Good-by, sir."

"Desmond——"

The doorway was empty; the evening *serenata* of a robin filled the hush. Allard's head sank on his arm in the darkest moment of the last somber months.

But presently he looked up again. Still dressed as when the accident had happened a few hours before, he possessed a tiny box of cartridges, and only the width of the room separated him from his desire. He impulsively tossed aside the blanket and slipped to the floor.

The fall drew a gasp of pain, but all before faded to insignificance beside the anguish of movement. It was not only the ankle, the injury had gone farther than that. Colorless, catching his breath with difficulty, Allard dragged himself inch by inch toward the shining goal.

Desmond was almost forgotten when the first shot rang out. They were firing at Desmond; they would come next for him.

It had a pearl and silver handle, that revolver. He had treasured it because it was a gift from Robert, and a souvenir too frequently duplicated to betray his identity. Now the pearl shone a glistening spot in the surrounding grayness, beckoning, tantalizing. It was so far across the room, so very far.

Shots again! He struggled yet more desperately, and the resulting pang brought the waves of faintness to his head. If he could only rest, so.

Some one was shouting, half exult-

antly, half fearfully, and other voices replied in equal excitement. Some one was killed, they were saying, had fallen from the cliff. Desmond, perhaps? Allard roused himself fiercely and saw with gratitude how near the coveted object lay.

The rush and patter of feet grew louder, the steady approach of the hunters. It hardly mattered, for the cool white handle was in the grasp of his outstretched hand. Robert's face leaned toward him, warm with relief and praise; Theodora was in the room, bringing fragrances of sandalwood and rose——

Once more he drove back the mists and dragged the revolver to him, smiling with knit brows.

"Just a moment," he claimed triumphantly. "Just a moment!"

With the thought, the relaxed tension, something gave way sharply. Still smiling with victory, his head sank to his arm in the long-delayed unconsciousness.

The first man cautiously pushed open the door.

CHAPTER III.

HIS HIGHNESS.

They looked at each other steadily; the distinguished visitor and the man who polished a brass railing. Beside them an official was droning a particularly monotonous and dreary account of the institution, his eyes half closed with the mental exertion of recollection, his thoughts turned inward and absorbed.

Around the bare room were distributed several gentlemen and other officers of the building, chatting with one another in varying degrees of boredom or interest, and scarcely noticing the quiet prisoner. Yet he was perhaps the only one present, with the exception of his *vis-à-vis*, who escaped the commonplace.

"You have something to say?" questioned the grave dark eyes of the visitor.

And the gray eyes of the prisoner returned their assent with the utter calm which lay on the surface of tragedy.

"On the east bank of the Hudson, six miles above Tarrytown," went on the droning voice; then broke as the visitor's cool, slightly imperious tones fell across the monologue:

"Ah, and is it permitted one to speak to your inmates, if one has the fancy?"

The official stared, then smiled vaguely.

"Certainly, sir; if *you* wish."

Again the eloquent glances crossed.

"You have much of this work?" questioned the visitor; the words scarcely heeded by either speaker or listener in the deeper search for a means of communication.

The prisoner answered in French, the fluent, barely accented French of a traveled American:

"That man in gray who accompanies you, monsieur, is not to be trusted. He was released from this place last year; he had shared in some Paterson anarchistic outrages. He watches you constantly."

The other's eyebrows went up a trifle, but he did not commit the mistake of glancing toward the man in question.

"You know me?" he asked, in the same language.

"No. But you are a European and evidently of position. I know him."

"I am infinitely grateful to you, monsieur," came the serious reply, and he paused, considering.

The tone and speech were from one gentleman to another; the prisoner flushed from throat to temples, the color dying out again to leave even his lips white. But he said nothing.

"You have more liberty than some of those here, I think," the visitor said.

"Yes; I am what they call a 'trusty,'" the straight line between the fine brows deepened markedly.

"I beg your pardon; I do not ask from curiosity. My yacht is anchored out there, before this place. If I return through here in an hour, on my way to it, can you be here still?"

"I think so, but I prefer not. I can aid you no further; and——"

"And?"

For an instant the curtain was withdrawn from the gray eyes.

"You wake what is better sleeping. It is not pleasant for me to meet you, monsieur."

"Yet I ask it," the visitor insisted.

"Very well. If I am not here it will be because it is not possible."

The visitor turned carelessly away, nodding to the official in passing.

"I fancied your prisoner a fellow countryman," he remarked. "But he appears to be French."

"Yes, sir. He said he came from the South."

The man had involuntarily kept alongside in replying, and the other slackened his step to permit the companionship.

"What is he here for committing?" he inquired idly.

"Counterfeiting, sir. Right over on that mountain across the river they captured him and killed one of his men. The rest got away in time. This one, Leroy his name is, was found unconscious, with a broken ankle and injured internally. He had hold of a pistol, and they guessed he meant to kill himself before they caught him. Clever work, theirs. This Leroy might have been 'from across the water,' as you say, sir; for no one knew him."

"How long has he been here?"

"Two years, sir."

"And his sentence?"

"Fifteen."

The visitor shuddered, and rejoined his companions rather bruskly.

"I am going into the town," he announced to them, "with Dancla. You may return to the yacht. Vasili, send the launch for me in an hour. Ah, and leave on that bench by the door my raincoat; I fancy it will be storming before we return."

"Very well, monseigneur," responded the trim young Vasili.

"I alone shall accompany your highness?" asked the man in gray.

The velvet black eyes passed over him deliberately.

"You alone, come."

They went out, past the prisoner who still polished the brass railing. Laughing and chatting, the rest of the party moved to the door nearest the river.

The short spring day drew toward its close. A sighing rain whispered around the building of sorrows, and very early shore and water alike blended into a vague indeterminate dusk.

It was rather less than the promised hour when the visitor reentered the upper end of the large hall. He was alone this time, except for the same stolid official; the man in gray had disappeared.

Opposite the prisoner he paused to light a cigar, then hesitated, looking from him in the little Morocco case in his own hand.

"I am going to take this man out again," he said in French, his light, casual tone excellently assumed. "Go to that door, put on the coat lying upon the bench and the cap in the left pocket, then walk slowly to the barred gate and wait for me. When I come, salute me and follow."

The prisoner stiffened to rigidity, his eyes sought the other's.

"I am guilty of what they accuse; do you still wish this?" he demanded.

There was a glint of admiration in the other's smile.

"I can distinguish a criminal from one of my own class. Yes." He turned to the official and offered him the case. "I wanted to give the poor devil a cigar," he explained, "but he says it is not allowed. Ah, I have forgotten to sign your register; will you come back?"

As they vanished, the prisoner went swiftly down the long room, casting around a glance of feverish scrutiny. He reached the door as a great gong announced the period when he should have returned from his work. Snatching up the coat, he slipped into it, pulled out the yachting-cap with its gold insignia; and finding a pair of gloves, drew them over his stained hands. So far!

The most dangerous part, the journey across the broad open wharf under the eyes of the armed guards in the

towers, at least gave him the tonic of the sweet wet air.

"I need Gerald Allard's old nerves," he told himself grimly. "If I reach there, perhaps I can believe he still exists."

The early twilight aided him; just light enough to show his conventional costume, just dark enough to veil discrepancies. He walked quite slowly and naturally; carefully avoiding puddles, stopping once to turn up his collar against the drizzling rain. Several times he looked back for his companion, and strolled on again.

A dozen eyes watched the self-possessed figure as he leaned nonchalantly against the barred gate, and passed from him to the more interesting spectacle of the small white launch and immaculate crew waiting outside.

There was so little time, and the visitor, now with three attendant officials, moved so slowly across the space.

The group came nearer, halted. Allard drew himself stiffly erect and raised his hand in salute as the tallest man came opposite, then obeyed a slight movement of direction and stepped behind him. A grating of locks, a brief exchange of compliments, and for the first time in two years the prisoner stood without the barriers. Free, if only for that instant; free, and in reach of the lapping river.

The sailors waited at rigid salute, the visitor stepped into the swaying launch, and as Allard followed the gate closed —*behind* him. The tiny engine puffed, caught its beat, and the boat darted toward the dim white shape out in the stream.

Lights were flashing up here and there in the buildings, shining through the barred windows. To see the unchecked sky again! At the throb of their motor the yacht gleamed unexpectedly into an outline of myriad-pointed fire. Men ran across the decks, a miniature staircase fell in readiness.

"Follow me closely," directed the cool voice, when the launch stopped.

The wet shining deck, the mutely respectful figures waiting to receive them, all blurred into insignificance for Allard. As his foot touched the yacht, pandemonium broke loose in the prison. Out over shouts and gong crashed the deafening roar of the huge whistle, rousing the countryside for miles around.

"It means?" questioned the master of the situation.

"They know I am missing—and they will think to search the yacht first."

"They will not search it without my consent, but I shall grant it. Come."

A hand closed on Allard's arm; he was guided swiftly down a tinted and gilded companionway, across several rooms no less brilliant, and finally halted in a jewel-box stateroom.

"The clothes are ready; get into them as soon as possible and come back to me. Lose no time, and toss the things you wear into that chest," came the directions. "I dare send no one to aid you."

"I understand," Allard answered, equally collected.

The other man went out to the salon. Touching a bell on the table, he gave his outer garments to the attendant who appeared.

"I shall not dress for dinner," he stated. "Let it be served here, now."

"Your highness is obeyed."

"And my companion is a gentleman who takes Dancla's place; let the suite be arranged for him."

"Yes, your highness."

His highness sat down in an armchair listening impassively to the din on shore which penetrated even here. His face was characterized very strongly by the locked tranquillity of expression seen in those who live constantly under the observation of others; he wore a mask of repose not readily lifted.

It was not long before Allard came out, and closing the door behind him, stood for a moment regarding his host. And prepared as he was for the change, the other yet returned the gaze with startled admiration and wonder. This gentleman who wore the dinner-dress so naturally, who betrayed his class in bearing and glance; how had he been confounded for one hour with the underworld? Who had found the stamp

of criminality in the strong, fine, sorrowful face.

"Monsieur," said Allard, taking a step forward.

Recalled, the other rose courteously.

"Pardon a thousand times; I neglected to introduce myself. It would not do for us not to know one another. I have told my people that you take the place of my secretary—the man of whom you warned me—so you comprehend; I am Feodor Stanief."

Too aloof from recent European news, too long separated in thought from his old careless knowledge of such things, the name awoke in Allard only a vague sense of familiarity.

"If you have so much patience, I will tell you my story when you choose, monsieur," he answered frankly and with dignity. "Until then, may I give you a half truth? I am called Gerald."

The soft tinkle of china interrupted them. Stanief had only time to reply with his unexpectedly brilliant smile before the servant entered.

"I shall have pleasure in claiming the confidence, Monsieur Gerald," he returned, "and may have one to give, if you concede what I hope. Marzio, what is that uproar outside?"

"Your highness, it is not known. The people on shore are much disturbed."

"Apparently. If we were home, Monsieur Gerald, I should call it a riot; but here——" he shrugged his shoulders and moved toward the table.

Allard followed, noting for the first time the title given the other. Interpreting his glance, Stanief nodded intelligence as the servant withdrew for an instant.

"Yes; a mere formality, but one it is not safe to ignore in our delicate position. To speak otherwise might draw attention."

Neither spoke during the first course. The rapid beat of a small engine finally disturbed the silence; a launch was approaching from the shore.

"Try your Sauterne," advised Stanief quietly.

Allard obeyed. The food nauseated him, the heavy pulse of his own heart seemed tangled with the nearing throb of the boat; the suspense was physical pain. The wine helped, sending its vivifying warmth along his numbed nerves.

"You know," the tranquil voice added, "this ship is foreign ground. There are a few formalities attached. We would have a little time, even——"

Allard lifted his head with a quick breath.

"Once, in such an hour, I asked one whom I believed a friend to leave me a revolver," he said. "Not being of the class, he refused. If there should be—a little time, I will make that request of you, your highness."

"And I *am* of the class. But there are many things before that."

Voices on deck, hurrying feet, stilled the sentence.

"Thank you," Allard answered, and waited.

Marzio again, deftly removing plates, changing glasses. Then another entrance: the blond Vasili who had accompanied Stanief that day.

"Well?" queried his chief.

"Your Royal Highness, Captain Delsar respectfully begs an interview."

"Why?"

"Your highness, a boat from shore has arrived and the officers request permission to search the yacht for an escaped prisoner."

"Is that the reason for the din they are creating?"

"Yes, your highness."

Stanief selected a cigarette and pushed the tray toward Allard.

"Of course they have no right to do so," he replied indifferently, "but I have no objection. Let them search, by all means. Tell Captain Delsar to aid them all he can. Although, unless he swam, there was no way for a man to reach the yacht except on the launch which brought Monsieur Gerald and me. Monsieur Gerald, let me introduce Lieutenant Paul Vasili."

Allard turned to acknowledge the other's friendly salute. Stanief faced the door, which consequently was behind his companion.

"Give the message, Vasili, and say the yacht is open to them. Even these

rooms, if they wish. And tell the captain that we sail in an hour. That is all."

Silence again. Allard, mechanically maintained the pretense of eating with each course while in reality knowing nothing but the faint sounds of the search and the intermittent roar of the whistle.

With the coffee and cigars came Vasili once more. Stanief nodded permission of the message.

"Your Royal Highness, the officers from the prison have finished. As a matter of form, they would accept your highness' offered consent and glance in here, in order to report every part of the yacht examined."

"Very good; admit them. Marzio, why have you this electric light over the table? Turn it out; the candelabra and the side lights are ample."

Both orders were promptly obeyed. Vasili disappeared and the glaring light went out, leaving the room softly glowing with rosy color. Stanief looked into the set face opposite with the first trace of annoyance on his own.

"I forgot the coat, left on the bench all the afternoon. If any one saw it——"

Allard made a movement, then the door behind him opened.

"Come in, officer," Stanief invited pleasantly. "You are satisfied with a mere survey, or do you wish to carry it farther? I think neither Mr. Gerald nor I have left this room vacant, however, since we came aboard at half past five."

"Yes, sir," answered an embarrassed voice, a voice which for months had represented autocracy for Allard. "We just want to report a complete search, sir. I'm sorry to trouble."

Stanief lit a cigar, letting the man slowly take in the scene. The gorgeous, velvet-draped salon, the last course of the dinner, the serene—distinguished visitor—there was no clue here. And certainly there was nothing to suggest a desperate convict in the gentleman in evening dress whose back was to the door, and who stirred his *café noir* so indifferently.

"Why did you fancy he came to the yacht?" Stanief inquired.

"Oh, excuse me, sir; it was only one chance. We thought he might have got to the river and swum for here. You see, it's pretty hard to get out the other way in his clothes."

Allard raised his head impulsively.

"Why," he began, then remembered the punctilious Vasili and checked himself. "I beg pardon, your highness."

A gleam of amusement flickered across Stanief's black eyes at the quickly learned etiquette.

"*Faites*, my dear Gerald," he granted, waiving the point.

"It occurred to me that your Royal Highness had ordered a raincoat to be left on the bench by the rear door, and when we returned it was not there. Could it be possible——"

"That it was stolen?" caught up Stanief, grasping the audacity of the idea. "Undoubtedly so. I fancied my order neglected and intended rebuking the one responsible. Officer, behold your clue: a hatless man in an English raincoat."

The phrase captivated the man's dull imagination.

"A hatless man in an English raincoat," he echoed, fascinated. "Yes, sir, thank you, sir. We will telegraph all around. If I may go, sir——"

"You are quite certain he is not aboard? I do not wish to carry any dangerous stowaways, and we sail at once."

"Quite sure, sir. I must waste no more time."

"Good night, then. I imagine you will have no more trouble with that prisoner."

"Oh no, sir," misunderstanding the double meaning. "Not after this. A hatless man in an English raincoat. Good night, sir."

"Marzio," said Stanief, when the door closed, "you may bring some cognac, and leave us. No one enters."

The voices on deck, the hurrying feet, and presently the retreating throb of a little engine.

"Drink your cognac, Monsieur Gerald."

"Thank you."

"Bah, your nerves are superb, but they pay beneath your stillness. Drink; I warn you that I have the habit of domination."

Allard drank.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BOND.

The habit of domination Stanief assuredly had, however, gracefully disguised and scarcely visible. Nor was Allard, bruised with conflict, exhausted, dazed, in the mood to resist.

He desired feverishly to speak; to tell his story and let Stanief, fully informed, decide whether the aid given already was to be continued further. The idea of a deception, a false belief in an injustice suffered by him, was intolerable. But Stanief smilingly imposed silence, and he yielded passively.

The cigars burned out slowly, the tumult on shore died away. A quivering vibration awoke the yacht to delicate life. Stanief smoked or played with his coffee. Allard leaned back in his chair, less in reverie than utter exhaustion.

Exactly as the bells rang the hour came the metallic clank of anchor-chains. The yacht shuddered under the screw, the glass and china tinkled faintly—then all settled into regularity as the engines fell into their gait and the beautiful boat moved down the river.

"And Vasili is out there in poignant distress because he cannot come in, 'to have the honor to report that we sail,'" remarked Stanief, breaking the long pause. "It was daringly conceived, Monsieur Gerald, but were you not a trifle imprudent in speaking before that brilliant visitor of ours. Your voice?"

Allard roused himself abruptly.

"Our speech was confined to monosyllables, back there," he answered. "No, I think there was no risk, your highness."

Stanief did not deprecate the title; perhaps unnoting, perhaps willing to let the other learn.

"We are 'on the high seas,' and free from listeners," he said composedly. "I ask you nothing, question nothing, but if you indeed wish to speak of the closed episode, Monsieur Gerald, I am ready. After to-night we will have other things to occupy us."

Allard leaned forward eagerly.

"I want you to know, it is your right to know," he answered, with a very fierceness of pride and sorrow.

He looked down at the polished surface of the table, his pallor deepening, if possible; then suddenly brought his eyes back to Stanief's and began to speak.

It was a very quiet story, very quietly told. It had never occurred to the Anglo-Saxon Allard to idealize his course into heroism; even mistaken heroism. Rather he had learned to see more clearly, to condemn himself, during those long bitter months. Of Theodora he simply spoke as his cousin and Robert's betrothed; yet dimly felt that the mute Stanief was reading all he left untold.

"There was no other way," he concluded, and the phrase was the key-note to all. "Undoubtedly it was the wrong way, but there was no other I could find, and I had to take care of them."

So far he had spoken of those he loved merely by their relationship. It was the final trust which Stanief asked by his next question:

"Will you tell me your name?"

And Allard laid his heart in the other's hand.

"Gerald Leslie Allard," he answered.

There was an instant's pause. Stanief folded his arms on the table and spoke in his turn with no less quiet sincerity:

"Of the ethics of what you have told me, Monsieur Allard, I am perhaps not a good judge. I come from one of the world's greatest countries, where from sovereign to peasant necessity is an excuse for all things. I have seen the highest officials of the state stoop to accept systematic bribery, I have seen nobles whose blood was filtered unmixed through centuries, tricking each other and the emperor who trusted them; I have seen the com-

Allard dragged himself inch by inch toward the shining goal.

manders of the army selling for private gain the supplies which stood between their soldiers and starvation. In what you have done I confess to realizing nothing but incredible courage and self-sacrifice, possibly misdirected. But it has left you alone, as I stand alone in a different sense, so placing a bond between us. You are absolutely free; will you cast your fortune with me, or shall I set you down in some of the European ports at which we shall touch?"

Allard bent forward to lay his hand in the one so frankly extended. He remembered Stanief's name now, and remembering, comprehended many things.

"I have no one, nothing," he answered earnestly. "The purpose for which I gave all is accomplished and laid aside. Your highness, if you will let me serve you; take your purpose for my goal, your life for my empty existence, I will give you all I can."

Stanief's firm clasp closed.

"Agreed. *Soit que soit.*"

And Allard repeated the promise as seriously:

"Be what may."

The whistle of a passing tugboat, laboring through the mists toward Haverstraw with its train of scows, drew the corresponding blare of the yacht's siren. Involuntarily Allard started, his overstrained nerves shrinking. Stanief smiled.

"Let Rome howl, Gerald—I may call you Gerald, since we commenced so? Indeed I must, after giving you that name in public. You are mine now, and all America cannot take you. Rest so far; it is one of our old sayings at home: 'A Stanief guards his own.'

"But now for details. You take the place of my secretary, whom I dismissed this afternoon. I have ordered his rooms prepared for you, and will send Petro to you; his ideas are confined to doing as he is told, and I shall explain to him that my invitation left you no time for packing. Of course you will resume your own name."

Allard drew back.

"My own——"

"Why not?" Stanief demanded. "Could anything be more safe? Masquerades are always dangerous and to be avoided. Gerald Allard's unquestioned history, his journey abroad from which he reappears as my secretary, defy all investigation; where an assumed name and past could only arouse doubt. If you were challenged now as the escaped prisoner, your safest course would be to give indignantly your own name, proving it by your Californian connection and by me. Gerald Allard has stepped back on his

stage. The last three years simply do not exist for you; knot the past and future together and let the marred strand go."

The logic was unanswerable; with a quivering breath Allard took back all he had resigned forever.

Stanief touched the bell and rose.

"You are tired, and I have much to arrange. No doubt," the dark eyes were amusedly expressive, "Monsieur Allard is familiar enough with yachting not to be bored to-morrow. You will find Vasili a cheerful companion, Rosal also. Marzio, show monsieur his rooms and send me Petro. And tell Captain Delsar I shall have pleasure in receiving him. Good night, Gerald."

"Good night, your highness," Allard replied, but his straight eloquent glance carried its message to the other's heart.

Alone at last in the coquettish suite set apart for him, the great reaction seized Allard. It was so few hours since, Leroy; so hard to grasp this reality. He was weary to exhaustion, but something very near fever drove him to the round window which swung back at his touch and let the wet, sweet air rush in.

Petro aroused him an hour later; and still with that curious passivity Allard allowed himself to be cared for, measured, respectfully consulted. He even found himself ordering the old dishes for breakfast, specifying the old hour of service. And with the once familiar comfort came more restfulness.

CHAPTER V.

THE NEW DAY.

The morning sunlight penetrated the room riotously, glinting in every polished surface and running golden-footed from point to point. Lying tranquilly among his pillows, Allard watched the man busied in folding and laying away a multitudinous array of garments, placing gloves and handkerchiefs in drawers and arranging toilet articles.

"You are not Petro," Allard remarked finally.

The man started and turned.

"No, monsieur. With monsieur's permission, I am Vladimir. His Royal Highness said that as monsieur had not yet engaged a valet for the voyage, perhaps I might be accepted. I would be very glad to serve monsieur."

"Very well," Allard assented. "What time is it?"

"Nearly ten o'clock, monsieur," he approached and kissed the hand outside the coverlet before the surprised American could object. "Every thanks, monsieur; I am monsieur's devoted servant. It pleases monsieur to rise?"

"I—suppose so. The yacht has stopped."

"Yes, monsieur. We are anchored before the great city, New York, since many hours."

Allard had yet to learn his Stanief; the time was to come when to know an affair in his charge was to abandon anxiety concerning it. The question of the wardrobe was embarrassing only from its overwhelming answer. No detail was forgotten; the very toilet-table bore its shining array, each dainty article carrying the correct monogram, G. L. A.

Marveling, Allard pictured what it meant to have produced this in one night; and vaguely realized that there must be a deeper object than mere consideration for his comfort, behind all this unnecessary elaboration.

Breakfast was served in his own miniature salon.

"His highness is awake?" he inquired, afterward.

"Monsieur, his Royal Highness went ashore an hour ago, to pay farewell visits of ceremony."

They were to sail soon, then. Allard's pulses quickened with relief at the prospect. Remembering Stanief's expressive injunction to show himself at ease and make friends with his new companions, he resolved to go on deck. But before the white and silver writing-desk he lingered wistfully.

"You can mail a letter for me, Vladimir?" he asked.

"Certainly, monsieur."

The letter must be convincing, and

not dangerous in the wrong hands. With a tenderness which was almost pain he recalled the last letter to his brother; written on that final night at home, while Robert sat by with hidden eyes. A letter he had headed South America, the date blank, to be used as an explanation to Theodora and her mother if the crash came and he disappeared for years.

The thick cream-tinted paper was convincing in itself, bearing in gilt letters the name of the yacht: *Nadeja*. The letter ran:

MY DEAR OLD ROBERT: I have just returned from the South, and of course intended to come straight home. But I met H. R. H. the Grand Duke Feodor Stanief, who has been visiting the United States, and he is taking me with him as his secretary. I owe him more than I can tell, or you guess, Bertie; and this service is a service of love. I will write again; you know there was no opportunity where I have been.

Give my love to Aunt Rose and Theo—is she quite my sister by this time?

Very happily and lovingly, my brother,

Your brother,

GERALD ALLARD.

The lower Hudson was swept by a strong salt wind when Allard reached the deck; green and white waves running under the bright sunshine and lashed into swirling froth by the innumerable boats plowing back and forth. On the yacht everything was activity and preparation, all sound overborne by the crash of loading coal. The busy Captain Delsar left his affairs and came to greet the guest punctiliously, if hurriedly.

"We sail this morning," he explained, "and you will understand all that involves, monsieur."

Allard responded cordially, and presently Lieutenant Vasili came to add his cheerful greeting and lead the way to the forward deck, where wicker chairs and small tables stood under a gay scarlet awning.

"His highness told me this morning to amuse you if I could," he declared. "Indeed I think he left me behind for that purpose, Monsieur Gerald."

"Allard," the other corrected pleasantly. "I am infinitely obliged to his highness, then."

"A thousand pardons; I misunderstood your name last night."

"Not exactly, his highness calls me Gerald—my Christian name."

Vasili's eyes opened and he regarded his companion with marked respect.

"He told me he had known you a long time," he assented, "and that you had been ill. The voyage across will tone you up—if you are a good sailor—before we reach home."

"I am a good sailor," Allard affirmed; rather astonished at Stanief's account of his health. He had no idea of the extreme delicacy of his own appearance, of how those years of torture had left him worn and colorless.

Vasili tilted his chair against the rail and smiled engagingly.

"For my part, I am always happiest at sea," he confided. "Not that I am concerned with political affairs—*pas si bête;* I leave that for wiser heads. But still one is never secure in a country like ours. Ah, this America is a restful place! No intrigues, no rivals, no salt-mines in the background."

"A delightful picture you are painting for me," suggested Allard laughingly.

"Oh, you are the friend of his highness, monsieur. Moreover, every one believes an American or an Englishman when he declares himself with one party; it is only each other whom we always suspect. *Tiens,* the little white boat!"

The little white boat in question was one of the city police-launches, and Allard's hand closed sharply on the arm of his chair as the officer in charge hailed the yacht, signifying his intention of coming on board. Captain Delsar came down to receive the visitors, not without visible impatience at the interruption.

"Come," exclaimed the diverted Vasili, after watching the colloquy for a few moments, during which several of the yacht's officers joined their chief. "But this is droll!"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, of course we all speak French—as does every one at home except peasants—but since Dancla went only

the Grand Duke is left who speaks English. And evidently our guests have no French."

Allard surveyed the group, and glanced up at the gorgeous flag fluttering in the breeze and casting its shadow over him. Foreign ground, Stanief had called this.

"I might play interpreter," he offered slowly.

"Surely! Am I dull not to think of that? Shall we go?"

Allard rose.

"Monsieur Allard, if you will indeed assist us!" welcomed the captain gratefully. "Consider that we sail in an hour, and the moments are going. His highness does not accept an excuse instead of a result."

"Delighted," Allard responded, nodding an acknowledgment of the sergeant's equally relieved salute. "Officer, can I translate for you? His highness is not on board, but I am his secretary——"

Oh, Stanief was very thorough! The cards Vladimir had presented were waiting for their owner to use on the occasion.

"You are very kind, Mr. Allard," said the deferential officer, reading the square of pasteboard. "You see, we received a telephone call from up the river at Peekskill, asking us to get a better description of the clothes that were stolen by an escaping convict. They've picked up a coat, but it looks rather different from what would be expected. In fact, there was a man inside of it, but he says he lost his hat in the wind and they haven't yet got the prison people to identify him."

It was so long since Allard had really laughed that he startled himself, but the humor of the situation was too much.

"I think you want to see the Grand Duke's valet," he explained, and translated for the others.

Petro was hurriedly sent for, and the fuming captain left the affair in charge of the two young men.

"Poor wretch; hope he gives them a run," commented Vasili. "Last year at home, I had to ride second-class on a crowded train. In the compartment was just such a case as this man's; convict being taken back to a fortress. We rode ten miles, twenty; suddenly he spoke to me as naturally as possible. 'You know what I am going to do, give me a cigar,' he said. Like that. I gave his guards a ruble, gave him a cigar; and went on reading my *Figaro*. Before we reached the next station, exactly over a deep ravine, he flung himself right through the door and down. Always felt glad I gave him the cigar."

There was a curious unreality in the scene for one of the actors, as he leaned against the rail in the warm April sunshine, Vasili chattering gaily by his side and the imperturbable policemen opposite. But he answered the little lieutenant's last sentence with a very sympathetic glance of comprehension.

Petro appeared presently, and Allard gravely repeated a description of the famous raincoat, giving the name of the London firm who had constructed it.

"Thank you, sir," said the satisfied officer, snapping his note-book shut. "Much obliged. You've no objection if your name gets to the papers, sir?"

Allard thought of Robert.

"Why, no. But I have done nothing."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

"And now?" queried Vasili. "Shall we go back and chat, or first go over the yacht? Unless you know it already, of course; I forget you are an old friend of his highness."

"Let us go over the yacht, if you will," Allard evaded, not at all certain of what Stanief might please to assert. He sighed relievedly, hearing the puff of the launch below. "We can rest afterward."

Vasili contemplated him reflectively, inwardly deciding that Stanief's American must have been very ill indeed to be so easily tired. But he led the way below, charmed with the new companionship, and they wandered together over the costly floating toy.

They ended in the general salon, and Allard's long-starved eyes went eagerly to the newspapers and magazines littering the table.

"Pleasant place," assented Vasili to

the glance, dropping into an easy chair. "And you will usually find some of us here. Of course Count Rosal is ashore with the Grand Duke now, but he will be enchanted to find you are going with us. These voyages nearly kill him with *ennui*. He likes race-horses and fast motor-cars, and the Théater Français."

"Then why does he come?"

"Why? There is a question! Because he is the Grand Duke's *aide;* because he wants to win favor with the man who will rule the country by the time we reach it."

"Why, the Emperor——"

Vasili raised one eyebrow significantly.

"Of course, if you do not want to talk," in slightly injured tones. "But every one knows the Emperor is dying."

Allard summoned his recollection of affairs European, doubtfully allowing for the gap of more than two years.

"The Grand Duke Feodor is the Emperor's nephew, not son," he objected.

"Oh, he will merely be regent, certainly," was the dry reply. "Never mind; I told you I understood nothing of politics."

Allard opened his lips to avow equal ignorance, then closed them. He had no idea of the rôle Stanief designed for him, or of what he was supposed to know.

The morning wore on quietly. The last preparations were completed; the yacht poised restlessly like a snowy bird on the point of flight. Lying in his chair, regarding the teeming river shut in on either side by the two great cities and feeling all alike hostile toward him, Allard clung almost superstitiously to the phrase of the night before:

"A Stanief guards his own."

Near noon a tiny boat darted from shore. The captain hurried to the head of the miniature stairway; Vasili uttered a hasty excuse and also went in that direction. Allard hesitated, in some doubt before this new etiquette, then judged by the others' attitude and remained where he was.

As Stanief stepped on the deck, another gorgeous flag rose majestically into place and unfolded its emblazoned notice of his presence. His black eyes swept over the scene comprehensively, then he gave a brief order to the captain and crossed directly to Allard.

"Good morning, Gerald," said the cool, faintly imperious voice; the warmly dark eyes met his.

Sighing, Allard yielded up the last resistance and gave his all.

"Your highness——" he murmured, and hated himself savagely for the unsteadiness of his tone.

Stanief sank into a chair and waved him to the one opposite.

"We are going to sail at once," he announced. "We will watch our progress out of the harbor and then have lunch. You have passed an agreeable morning?"

"Yes—no," answered Allard incoherently, taken by surprise. "That is, it is all right now."

Interpreting for himself, Stanief smiled.

"Tell me about it," he suggested.

The ringing of anchor-chains ceased, the little launch again swung in its davits. The yacht shuddered, moved. Vasili came up and saluted rigidly.

"I have the honor to report that we sail."

Stanief rested his dark head against the chair-back and met the brilliant gray eyes with the sweet serenity of his own.

CHAPTER VI.

THE KING IS DEAD—LONG LIVE THE KING!

The *ennuied* Count Rosal lunched with them; a sallow, fatigued young patrician who wore a *pince-nez*. He obviously was much pleased with the American, and inquired anxiously whether he ever motored. Receiving an affirmative reply, he invited him with an actual approach to enthusiasm, to try a new French car as soon as they landed.

Allard accepted willingly, even gaily; a little of his color had revived with the ocean wind, some fine elixir had mounted through his veins as the yacht drew from the arms of the harbor and danced out over the long Atlantic swell.

After luncheon Stanief dismissed the third member with that nonchalant grace of his.

"Did you write any letters this morning?" he asked, when the salon had settled into its usual repose.

"One; to my brother."

"Good; every one writes letters, an excellent thing to do. I gave your name to an avid-eyed band of reporters, as one of those sailing with me. You will be a person of some importance in the tangled affairs to which I am taking you; it is just as well to prepare."

"I have no desire to be curious," Allard began tentatively.

"But you naturally would like to know what is happening. Indeed it is necessary that you know." He paused an instant. "Do you recall what I said to you last night of my country, of its intrigue and wrong and lack of faith?"

"Yes."

The shadows deepened across the fine dark face.

"All my life I have walked in the shadow of one man's hate," Stanief said quietly. "I have known it watching greedily for my least indiscretion, stepped cautiously to avoid the snares it spread for me. Unable to touch me openly unless I myself stooped from inherited safety, my enemy has employed every petty goad to sting me to a moment's forgetfulness. I have never taken a friend, conscious that one would be forced to betrayal if not already planning it. Living in the center of a dazzling pageant, the focus of a dazzling hate, I have had just one hope to carry with me. Not a pleasant hope, but it is to be fulfilled. My enemy is dying."

"The Emperor——"

"Exactly."

Allard remained silent, understanding Vasili better now.

"Before I started on this voyage, taken at his command," he continued, "I bade farewell to my imperial uncle. Ill, grimly and helplessly conscious of the ultimate end, he looked up from his pillows at me. 'Your day is coming,' he declared. 'I know how long your regency will last, how completely my son will be left your toy and victim. But I shall wait on the threshold of the next world, Feodor Stanief, until you come and I see your punishment. Now go.' It was the confession of failure, the laying down of the cards, the first frankness between us."

The two men looked at each other.

"I am probably regent now," said Stanief quietly.

"My cousin Adrian," he resumed, after a moment, "by this time perhaps my Emperor Adrian, is fourteen years old. Not until he is seventeen can he be crowned and take the government in his own grasp; that is, the country is absolutely ruled by me for the next three years. By me; but those years will be a splendid warfare, a struggle muffled in cloth-of-gold, a ceaseless vigil beside which my old life was peace. The country is divided into two vast parties: those who wish me to take the crown, and from whom I must protect Adrian; those who wish to rid themselves of me and govern as they choose through the child-emperor. Remember that neither faction believes I will ever permit my cousin to take the Empire from me. Loyalty, honor, justice—those are pretty, extinct phrases of chivalry to their minds.

"For myself, I make no pose of virtue and I merely am obstinately resolved not to do what is expected of me, but I *will* carry this through and crown my cousin on his seventeenth birthday; if I live."

Allard rose impulsively and held out his hand.

"'*Soit que soit!*' we said last night," he cried. "Let me aid; stand or fall."

"A desperate cause," warned Stanief, keeping the hand in his firm clasp. "For day and night my enemies will pour their poison into Adrian's ears; Adrian, whose father must already have taught him distrust and dread of me. It may very well be that when I resign the absolute power to the young Emperor, he himself will first use it to crush me."

"Impossible! And if it be so, at least we will have fought the good fight."

"Then open the lists to Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. We will live our own way for these three years, and abide the decision."

There was no question of etiquette between the two who stood together with laughter glancing across the surface of an earnestness too deep for speech. Allard had no way of divining that the Stanief he knew did not exist for any one else; that the reserve of a lifetime was broken in their friendship.

They sat down again presently.

"Long ago, when Adrian was very much younger, I used to see him more intimately," Stanief mused rather sadly. "I was weary even then of the constant strife and suspicion; I longed to make a friend of my small cousin and some day find calm under his rule. But the Emperor interfered, and we have seen each other only formally since. Now comes your part, Gerald. I shall place you in Adrian's suite as his personal attendant. I want you to do what I cannot; to guard him from hour to hour so far as possible, from my self-styled friends, and his enemies. He will like you—you have that gift."

"Gift?" Allard puzzled.

"The gift of being liked. And being an American, you will escape much of the jealousy which would attach to one who could demand more. It is absolutely necessary for me to have some one near my cousin whom I can trust."

"I will do anything you wish," he answered simply. "Your purpose—let me serve it also. Only I will have to ask you to teach me a bit; I am afraid my ideas of the most formal court in Europe——"

"I shall teach you nothing whatever," Stanief declared, with his sudden smile. "Let the imperial Adrian have that amusement. Do not forget what I have implied to those you meet here; that you are merely my secretary as a whim, and are in reality my friend. You understand?"

Allard did understand; the elaborate luxury with which he had been surrounded, the deference of even Count Rosal, the caution of Vasili.

"I would rather stay with you than be a child's plaything," he said wistfully. "But it's all right."

Stanief regarded him for an instant, then reached for a cigarette.

"You will be with me. But if you have any idea that Adrian is like a child, wait," he observed dryly. "And now let us enjoy the voyage; since it is our last quiet period for several years."

Before Allard could reply, an agitated knock fell on the door and Marzio admitted the pale and breathless Rosal.

"Well?" Stanief questioned, instinctively rising.

Allard rose with him, and standing they received the message:

"I regret to report, by wireless from New York, the death of his Imperial Majesty the Emperor, at noon to-day."

A brief hush, then Rosal spoke again in nervous conclusion:

"His Imperial Majesty the Emperor Adrian requests the return of your Royal Highness to the capital."

CHAPTER VII.

ALLEGIANCE.

"Check. You are losing your game, my Gerald."

Allard laughed in frank admission; a tanned, bright-eyed Allard after the long voyage.

"I am stupid to-night, monseigneur. It is difficult to sit here and play chess when we are anchored at last before our goal, the city of excitements."

Stanief shot a glance at him; perhaps he himself could have confessed a similar inability, if he had chosen, in spite of his indolent impassivity.

The lap of the calm water against the yacht's side marked the rising of the tide; the roar and hum of the huge city came strangely after ocean silences. Allard gathered his straying thoughts together and compelled his attention to the game. They were changing the watch on deck, he reflected absently; he heard the movement and agitation.

For any one to disturb Stanief unsummoned was rare; for the door to be opened like this, without permission, was unprecedented. But Marzio offered no excuse as he held aside the heavy portière. Stanief lifted his eyes languidly, then sprang to his feet with an abruptness that sent the chessmen rattling over the floor. Marzio dropped the curtain, closing the door softly as he went out.

The slight, rather frail boy clad in deep mourning was not unlike Stanief himself in fine dark beauty of feature, and there was a composed stateliness worthy of both in the gesture with which he extended his small hand in greeting. Stanief moved forward without a word, and kneeling, bent his head to the slim fingers for which the one great jewel seemed too heavy. Still on his knee, in constraint of their difference in height, he received Adrian's formal embrace.

"I am glad you have returned, cousin," the boy said, with a grave dignity of speech corresponding to his bearing. "To-morrow—but I wished to see you before then."

Stanief looked into the eyes on a level with his own, before rising.

"I shall hold this visit always in my heart, sire," he answered. "I have not been given many such pleasant memories."

"It is a long time since we saw each other; you did not come to me——"

"That was never my fault, sire."

"No," he conceded calmly. "I knew it was not, although they told me so."

"I am grateful for so much justice. Permit me——"

Adrian took the armchair which the other advanced, and himself indicated a seat very near for his cousin. On Stanief his large, intent eyes were fixed with an imperiously eager scrutiny.

"You are the same as always, as you were last winter," he declared slowly. "Dalmorov has said I would find you very different, now."

"The Baron Dalmorov is more than kind," Stanief replied, betrayed into his rare frown. "May I ask why I should have changed?"

"Because you are regent, and you govern all."

"I beg your pardon, sire; if I am regent, you are none the less emperor."

Over the young face swept an expression which so altered, so hardened it, that it was as if another and dual self came into view.

"Then I rule *you*, as my father did," he flashed.

"Yes, sire," Stanief replied steadily. "But——"

"But? You say *but?*"

"May I speak frankly? You will find many people to flatter you, to tell you facile surface-truths; let me for once tell exactly my meaning. Assuredly you do rule me and your country, so far as the possibilities permit. Yet you are surrounded by those who hate me, and even you, sire; who would joyfully see us both fall if they might mount upon the ruins. Many times I may see what is hidden from you, and I must act accordingly. Sire, it is my intention to hold this seething empire of yours in my grasp, to force it to bend or break in its stubborn wilfulness, until three years from now I give it back to you a tranquil government. But—and for this I said but—if necessary I will act against your will as against all other forces, until I carry my purpose to its end and have you crowned on your seventeenth birthday."

He drew a swift breath, caught by his own vehemence; his eyes never leaving those unchildish ones opposite.

"And on the day of your coronation, sire," he concluded, with a touch of sadness, "you will rule without the *but*. Call me to account then; I assure you I will have no friends to protest."

Adrian did not move at all, or answer the daring declaration. His head averted, he looked down at the floor.

Stanief waited a little, and the light died out of his face.

"You do not understand me, sire," he said, very quietly. "Or, understanding, you do not pardon one who serves you even against your will. I am thirty-two years old; it is my comfort to believe that when you reach my

age, when jealousy and anger have passed away and perhaps taken me with them, that you will think differently of Feodor Stanief. Will you allow me to order some refreshment brought?"

Adrian moved then, and the color rushed over his cheeks as he struck one small open palm on the arm of his chair.

"I understand you," he cried passionately. "Oh, I understand! Can I trust you; it is that, Feodor. No one speaks his thoughts to me, every one *lies*. The Emperor told me that many times before he died. 'Do not trust your cousin,' he whispered to me on the last day. 'Then I must trust Dalmorov?' I asked. 'No,' he said, 'no, better Feodor than him. Trust no one.' And now you ask it of me."

"Yet you came here to-night, sire," Stanief reminded him.

"Because I *must* trust some one. Because I know Dalmorov and his falseness, while I do not know you, cousin."

"Then I ask you only to suspend judgment until you do, sire. A regent there must be; I, or another, if I die——"

"I would rather have you than any one else in the world."

"There is no one—I speak knowing our court—no one else whose pride and honor so compel him to loyalty. And I stand in grievous need of your protection, my Imperial cousin."

Adrian's head lifted haughtily.

"Of my protection! You, now?"

"I, now. Through you, if you lend your name to their use, my enemies can make the task I have set myself difficult beyond description."

The kindling fire had caught, at last; with the first boyish impulsiveness of the interview Adrian's response flashed to meet the appeal:

"You need not fear that! You need not fear me."

"Thank you, sire," Stanief answered simply and gravely.

There was a pause.

"I have come alone," Adrian mused, with a half sigh, "with Gregor. He does what I wish because he knows Dalmorov hates him and he is afraid to stand alone. So when I bade him bring me here secretly to-night, after I had seemingly retired, he obeyed. I like to be obeyed." The expression of a moment returned transiently.

"And so I must go back at once, or they may discover I have gone. But I am glad I came, cousin; it seems easier now."

"Sire," Stanief said, and somehow his tone made Allard feel suddenly abashed as one who stands before a thing not for his eyes, "there will come a day when you will stand in the great cathedral to receive the oaths of allegiance of your nobles. There will be all ceremony, all solemnity, but—take mine now. You have been taught to have faith in such promises; when you receive mine for the second time, I hope it will have gained some value in your sight."

"I wish it did now; I almost think it does," he answered, with a bitterness and energy singularly strange from his boyish lips. "I want to have faith in you, cousin."

He rose, and Stanief with him.

"I care for nothing," he added, reverting to the previous invitation. "I have already stayed too long. Monsieur," his eyes went to Allard for the first time, "monsieur is the American gentleman who sailed with you from New York?"

Allard came forward in response to a glance from Stanief.

"Sire, I have the honor to present Monsieur Gerald Allard, whom I have persuaded to come with me because I also have need of one friend whom I can trust."

He was after all so pathetic in his lonely and sophisticated youth, this child saluting him; Allard's clear gray eyes involuntarily expressed all their sympathy and warm kindliness. And meeting the regard, Adrian gave him his only smile of the evening.

"It is easy to trust you, Monsieur Allard," he said wistfully. "I wish you were my friend instead of Feodor's."

"Is it not the same thing, sire?"

"Is it?"

"I sincerely believe so, sire."

"Bring Monsieur Allard with you to-morrow, cousin," he directed, lifting his gaze to Stanief. "And good night."

"You will allow me to accompany your return, sire."

"Certainly not; to attract all the capital!"

"Pardon, I meant as secretly as Gregor attends you; who—again pardon me—is scarcely attendance enough."

Adrian shook his head decisively.

"Your people on the yacht——"

"They are not already aware that your Imperial Majesty is here?"

"You can order them to be silent," he retorted with angry irritation.

"Exactly, sire," said Stanief, and waited.

Adrian was swift of thought.

"Very well," he yielded. "As you will, cousin. Good night, Monsieur Allard."

He held out his hand, and quite unconsciously Allard took the little fingers in his warm clasp. Stanief, holding aside the curtain, smiled to himself; but Adrian accepted the Americanism equably and his last glance was all friendly.

It was three o'clock in the morning when Stanief reentered the *Nadeja's* salon. Allard was still there, and rose expectantly to receive him.

"I waited," he explained.

"You need not have," Stanief replied, with all his usual cool serenity. "Go and rest; to-morrow the battle opens. Only——"

"Only, monseigneur?"

He came over to the table to find the tiny gold-tipped cigarettes.

"Only it was not with you I played chess to-night, Gerald, but with Dalmorov and the late Emperor, my uncle. And I claim check."

CHAPTER VIII.

TO MEET THE EMPEROR.

There are some periods which offer to the backward glance of memory rather a blur of blended color than a distinct picture; a rich and shining tapestry in which no one thread can be distinguished. So always to Allard seemed that first week in the country he now learned to call home.

But two incidents detached themselves from the bright background and always remained with him. The first was the first morning, when Stanief formally met the Emperor at the palace; and, as he had stooped to the salute, Adrian had deliberately given him an embrace so markedly affectionate that even Allard felt the significant thrill run through the room. And then, even while the unusual color still flushed Stanief's dark cheek, Adrian shot a glance at a sharp-faced man opposite; a glance so sneering, so bitterly triumphant, that the straightforward American actually shrank from the dual thought. Evidently the embrace was given less to please Stanief than to annoy this other. Seeing the man's rigidly held face beneath the ordeal, he knew without question that this was the Baron Dalmorov whose desire in life was to prevent this very friendship between the cousins.

Never again did Allard make the mistake of measuring Adrian by his few years.

The second event was near the end of the week; one noon when Stanief came home from a visit to the palace and found Allard alone.

"Do you remember the trust you offered to take for me?" he asked abruptly. And without waiting an assent, "You are summoned to it, already."

"Monseigneur?"

"The Emperor this morning asked me to make you of his household. It is more than I hoped to gain, that he should himself make the request; yet——"

They looked at each other; Allard startled and half dismayed, Stanief less tranquil than usual.

"Yet I shall miss you, Gerald," he concluded.

So from the gorgeous household of the regent, one member passed to the still more gorgeous palace.

It was not possible to live at the palace without learning many things. But

it required just one day for Allard to learn enough of Adrian to make him smile at ever having thought Stanief imperious. The desire of absolute dominion and power over those near him was the most obvious characteristic of this descendant of a hundred autocrats. Moreover, he tolerated no contradiction, no evasion of a resolve.

"You are not rich in your own right, Monsieur Allard?" he said one day, with his mature directness and self-possession.

They were strolling up and down a terrace overlooking the river, and Allard involuntarily paused in surprise and some embarrassment.

"No longer, sire," he admitted, truth coming as the one course.

"My cousin—you served him as his secretary?"

"Yes, sire."

Adrian sat down on a broad marble seat under the trees, lifting his head with the movement usually to be translated as a signal of danger.

"You serve me, not the regent. As one of my household, you will accept from me in future."

"Pardon me, sire——"

"I will have it so, monsieur. You must be all mine, *all*. I shall speak to Feodor—— Why do you object? You do then consider yourself his, not mine?"

"Sire, you misinterpret; I am assuredly of your service."

"Then you accept?"

Allard met the flashing gaze helplessly; it was the other Adrian, distrustful, jealous, haughty, whom he faced and to whom he yielded.

"It is as you wish, sire, of course. I thank you."

"You do not," he retorted shrewdly, although his brow relaxed. "Why did you resist?"

Again Allard took refuge in the simple truth, a little sadly.

"We Americans, sire, are not accustomed to serve, I am afraid. We would like to stand alone. If I could accept the Grand Duke Feodor's protection without such reluctance, it was because of old reasons and old love."

"For him?"

"Yes, sire."

"Do you know Dalmorov secretly urges to me your love for Feodor as a cause for dismissing you?"

"I had not known it, although I might have guessed. But you could not believe me, sire, if I told you I did not love him."

"No; you are very easy to read. And I know more: I know that Feodor is glad to have you near me, although he is fond of keeping you with himself. Why?"

Allard regarded his keen young inquisitor candidly.

"Because—I use his own phrase, sire—because I am the only one he can wholly trust."

Adrian's eyes opened, then he laughed outright and the sinister personality faded altogether from his expression.

"You tell me that yourself, Monsieur Allard? Oh, if Dalmorov could hear you! Never mind; perhaps Feodor is deceiving you, perhaps you are both sincere, but certainly you yourself are all truthful. His turn also comes today; my cousin's."

"I do not understand——"

"It is not necessary. I am going to receive him here, this morning. After he arrives, pray stay at the other end of the terrace and let no one pass to disturb us."

However puzzled by the last suggestion, Allard could only comply with the request and retire as Stanief came down the steps a moment later. And Stanief, seeing Adrian waiting alone, left his *aide* at the head of the terrace and alone came to him. So, Vasili at one end of the grassy ledge, Allard at the other, the cousins were for once unobserved.

Adrian's expression was unusually animated as Stanief bent over his hand.

"Do you know why I wished to see you out here in quietness, cousin?" he demanded.

"I am afraid not, sire," Stanief confessed, smiling.

"Then sit down here," he touched the

wide bench on which he himself was seated, "and I will tell you."

Stanief obeyed, and Adrian surveyed his stately kinsman with doubting intentness.

"That night on the *Nadeja*," he at last said, "when you told me that I governed, *'but'*—were you in earnest? It amused me to tell Dalmorov—not all you said or when you said it, of course—yet some of that. I told him you had promised to do as I wished, and he insisted that you played with me. Were you in earnest, I wonder?"

"Absolutely in earnest," Stanief answered, too well trained in self-mastery to betray his irritation at being discussed with his rival in the game of the future.

"*'But,'*" Adrian repeated, and sat silent for an instant. "Were you ever in love with a woman, cousin?"

The question was so unexpected that Stanief started and replied almost at random:

"No, sire."

"Dalmorov says that you were; long ago."

"Dalmorov," the other began, his tone chilling. "The incident to which Baron Dalmorov doubtless refers, sire, hardly answers your question. Ten years ago, when I was less than twenty-two, I was briefly attracted toward a lady of the court. The affair died in its birth, on my discovery that mademoiselle was acting as the paid spy of the Emperor your father. Since then, I have thought of more important matters."

Adrian leaned back, his slim fingers twisted together.

"That was the Countess Sophia Mirkoff," he supplemented calmly, "whose husband you pardoned from The Two Saints, last month. Dalmorov informed me. Was that because you still care?"

"No; because I would not have her imagine I remember enough for prejudice," Stanief answered, with glacial indifference.

The approving fire shot across the boy's lowered eyes, his pride sprang to comprehension of the other's.

"I am glad it is so," he said sedately. "I have been arranging your marriage, cousin."

If the terrace had crumbled beneath them, Stanief could have been no more astounded.

"I beg your pardon!" he gasped.

"Why not; it is my privilege?" Adrian returned, not moving.

Stanief opened his lips, and closed them again. The green and gold garden, the blue river and white city spread below, swam in a dazzle of color. He had never been more deeply annoyed, or more furiously angry with Dalmorov. But habitual control again aided him.

"I have no desire to marry, or attention to give such a distraction, sire," he answered.

"You would have to marry sooner or later, cousin."

"Then permit it to be later. After your coronation, if you still insist."

Adrian's small mouth set in a firm line rivaling the regent's own.

"I wish it now. I have arranged that you shall marry the Princess Iria of Spain."

"Sire, forgive me if I presume to remind your Imperial Majesty that I have the right of questioning an order so personal."

The steel-hard anger of Stanief's voice struck fire from the flint of Adrian's determination.

"So I rule you!" he flashed tempestuously. "So you meant your pretty phrases! Dalmorov was right, right. You played with me, and I will never pardon you, Feodor Stanief."

Stanief drew back, realizing all the trap prepared for him.

"You are severe, sire," he retorted with dignity. "Perhaps reflection on how unexpected this is, of how serious to me is the amusement which to you signifies nothing, may win your indulgence. My life is full to overflowing, there is no place in it for a wife."

"You refuse?"

Stanief bit his lip.

"No, sire; I protest."

Adrian stood up, and the other perforce rose with him.

"You yourself said it," the boy sta-

ted, his chest heaving with passion. "Now, the test. I have the right, you know it. Do you govern me, or I you?"

"Sire——"

"You or I?"

Stanief looked very steadily into the blazing young eyes, himself colorless with the restraint forced upon his own emotions.

"I believed there were two promises given in the *Nadeja*, sire," he answered, never more quietly. "It seems only one is to be remembered and Baron Dalmorov wins. But I make no complaint; I suppose your last question was scarcely serious."

"You consent?"

"I obey," he corrected pointedly.

At once victorious and dominated by the other's bearing, Adrian flung himself on the seat and motioned his cousin to the seat beside him. But Stanief remained standing, choosing not to see the invitation, and there was a pause.

"I do remember my promise," Adrian declared, proudly reverting to the reproach of the moment before. "If I have made you do this, cousin, it was not to please Dalmorov."

Stanief bowed, answering nothing.

"The lady, you will have heard of her," he continued. "I met her last year, on the Riviera. In her country they call her the Gentle Princess because—she is. And she is very lovely."

Still the dark face was unstirred. His point gained, Adrian fretted and chafed before the change he himself had wrought.

"You are like Monsieur Allard; you do not want to yield your will," he said, half petulantly, half haughtily. "He is mine, you gave him to me; yet he did not like it because I said no longer shall his fortune come from any one but me. Why?"

"He is an American, sire."

"Why does that make a difference between you and me?"

"I love him, sire."

The cold explanation coincided perfectly with Allard's; illogically Adrian felt a pang of isolation before this friendship, although he would not have believed either if they had professed the same affection for him.

"The churches are ringing the hour," he remarked, the sullen child struggling with the Emperor. "If you wish to go, as usual, you have my leave."

"Thank you, sire; my hours are indeed crowded."

"You are willing to demand the Princess Iria in marriage?"

"As you dispose, sire."

Satisfied and dissatisfied, he held out his hand.

"You are not content, cousin," he accused. "You think me unkind."

Stanief paused to meet the wilful gaze.

"Perhaps I think of a day the years are bringing, sire," he replied gravely, and bent his head yet lower to the jeweled fingers which grasped so much.

Adrian flushed scarlet.

"No," he denied fiercely. "Feodor, you cannot believe I will fail you, if you do not me? You cannot think that then, after that——"

Stanief did not help him at all. Taking refuge in wordlessness, Adrian left the sentence broken and let his visitor go, with an assumption of dignity which hardly concealed the sting of the rebuke received. But he did not offer to relinquish the purpose so distasteful to Stanief.

For half an hour the terrace remained hushed and silent under the noon sunshine, the tree-shadows wavering back and forth across the small, motionless figure.

"Monsieur Allard!" at last the summons rang.

Allard returned serenely, of course ignorant of the recent stormy discussion.

"In a few months," Adrian stated, "the Princess Iria de Bourbon will come here to be married to the regent. I wish you to be one of the escort which will meet her and bring her to the capital."

"But, sire——"

"You are surprised?"

"I did not know the Grand Duke contemplated marriage, sire," Allard explained, stunned.

"He did not; I choose to have it so. You will go?"

"Surely there will be many more fitted for such an honor, sire. Of course it will be as you arrange; but I would prefer to stay here."

Adrian moved, sighing; his lip took a softer curve and for the first time he almost looked his few years.

"If you like her, monsieur, Feodor will like her. I want you to see her, to tell him good of her. She is different from any one else—when we were both in Italy we saw each other every day, and I know. She is so gentle; I want her here."

Allard gazed at him in utter wonder.

"Feodor believes I force the marriage to annoy him and please Dalmorov. It is not so; it is because I want Iria here. You understand that?"

"I am trying, sire."

Adrian stood up decisively.

"Let us go in. When the time comes, Monsieur Allard, you shall go with her escort."

CHAPTER IX.

GUINEVERE OF THE SOUTH.

It was quite a month after that sunny noon on the Emperor's terrace, that María Luisa Iria de Bourbon was informed of her betrothal to the Grand Duke Feodor Stanief. She also received the announcement on a garden terrace, by a caprice of chance; but it was a terrace of the South, starred and flowered all over with violets, heavily sweet tuberoses and blue Florentine irises. Moreover, it was sunset, and she stood a slender white figure against the rosy sky.

"It is all decided?" she asked in a hushed, pathetic little voice. "It is sure to happen, señora?"

"Quite sure," answered her mother, with a firmness not unsuggestive of Adrian.

The princess made a movement forward, then swayed like one of her windblown irises and slipped down to the old moss-green steps. When in her own room they revived her, she turned to hide her face among the pillows.

"I am afraid," she whispered under her breath. "I am afraid."

That was all. She had been taught obedience in a convent, and the duquesa her mother was not to be resisted. One does not stop the mills of the gods by laying a flower across their wheels.

But if Stanief seized every delay of diplomacy and ceremony in his Northern court, he was unconsciously aided by every feminine subterfuge from the gentle princess in her sun-kissed home. Between one excuse and another, it was six months after the announcement before the escort-ship anchored in the cobalt-blue bay which makes a dimple in the curving cheek of Southern Spain. And then Iria met some of her new countrymen.

Not easy were their names and titles to her lisping Latin tongue, as she greeted the guests graciously and gracefully, her mother by her side. But as one gentleman was presented, she leaned forward with delicate surprise.

"Monsieur Gerald Allard," she echoed, her large golden-brown eyes on his face. "Monsieur is not then of my future country?"

"Madame, I am an American," he explained, almost with the tenderness one involuntarily shows a child. It seemed to him that he had never seen anything more appealing than her young dignity and pathetic beauty of expression.

Iria regarded him earnestly. His right arm hung in a scarf, but he bore the injury with a bright unconcern that suggested it rather a badge of honor than an embarrassment. Although so simply announced, his companions waited for him to pass on with deferential patience and lack of surprise at her interest. Very suddenly the young girl flushed, her golden-brown head drooping on its white stem.

"I am most glad to have met monsieur," she murmured confusedly.

After that the preparations for the departure went on more rapidly. Contrary to all expectations, the princess was not too weary to sail next day, and embarked with her mother and their ladies without too obvious regret.

The chief of the escort, the venerable Admiral Count Donoseff, was charmed and flattered by the interest shown in his staff by their future mistress. The first lady of the Empire Iria would be, until Adrian's distant marriage; her friendship might be valuable.

"Monsieur Allard has then injured his arm?" she remarked, on the third day of the voyage.

"Madame, in an act of devotion most remarkable," the Admiral replied. "Imagine that a week before we sailed, an insane student made an attack upon the Emperor. His Imperial Majesty was driving with Monsieur Allard seated opposite, when the criminal leaped on the step of the carriage and attempted to plunge a knife into the Emperor's heart. Monsieur Allard flung himself forward and caught the blow on his own arm, undoubtedly saving the Emperor's life at the expense of a dangerous wound to himself. Drenched with blood, he held the assassin's wrist until aid arrived."

Iria shuddered, yet listening thirstily.

"I heard—a little of this," she said breathlessly. "But I thought it was his Royal Highness the Regent who was hurt."

The Admiral blushed at his own forgetfulness; a courtier should never forget.

"Certainly; he also, madame," he hastened to assure. "He was beside the emperor and so at a disadvantage, but he sprang to aid Monsieur Allard in holding the man and received a slight wound in disarming him. All Europe rang with the story, and Monsieur Allard was decorated with the Grand Star of the Order of St. Rurik. The justice of the regent is swift; the criminal was tried and executed next day."

Iria glanced down the deck to where Allard chatted with a couple of young nobles of the court, the sun striking across his bright hair and laughing face.

"The regent," she began shyly, then relapsed into silence with her ready change of color.

But a little later she caught Allard's eye and summoned him by a scarcely perceptible movement of her head. He came with pleasure and saluted her with that direct friendliness of regard which had carried him safely past many a shoal and undercurrent during his continental life.

"The Count Donoseff has been telling me the history of your wounded arm, monsieur," she said. "Let me add my poor admiration to all you receive, realizing that you saved the Emperor who is soon to be my sovereign also."

"You are too gracious, madame," Allard protested lightly. Gaiety came very easily to him since that day when he had saved Adrian's life and Stanief's honor. It seemed to him that Gerald Allard had not only paid; he had re-earned the right to existence; justified his liberty.

"If all the world knows of it——"

"Oh, pardon; I only meant to say that the grand duke was present and did as much as I."

Something in the words brought her soft smile.

"Is not the grand duke usually where you are, monsieur?" she queried.

"I am with him whenever he and my service of the Emperor permit, madame."

"Only then?" she doubted.

Surprised, he shrugged his shoulders laughingly.

"Some one has been telling tales of me, princess. I confess I am with him more than is strictly warranted."

"I have heard so much of his coldness, his severity," she ventured, her lashes sweeping her round young cheeks. "He, he cares for nothing, no one, they say."

"Oh, no, madame," Allard denied, warmly enlisted in the defense. "That is most unjust. Consider only those from whom such reports come; there is no one living who has more undeserved enemies. I know him capable of love; I have seen it, felt it, lived it. And he works, madame; how he works! The country under his rule gains new life, new hope. Madame, if I might presume, I would implore you to believe nothing of him except what he himself will show you."

She crimsoned before his fervor, but her delicate face expressed no anger at the daring.

"I will not," she assented, still with that strange timidity. "I was frightened at first, but not now—not any more. The regent is fair, with gray eyes, is he not, monsieur?"

"No, madame; he is very dark," he assured her hastily, his thoughts on Stanief's much-loved face.

Iria smiled, bending her head still lower.

"He is perhaps—fanciful, monsieur? He might do something quite useless and romantic, just for a caprice?"

"Hardly, madame. I think he does nothing without a purpose. He—I believe he has not been very happy, princess."

"And is he now?" she asked faintly.

Allard recalled himself to gallantry with charming grace.

"Madame, he should be happier than any one living."

"Thank you, monsieur," she breathed, and let him retire presently, her bosom heaving under its white linen and lace.

It was a very pale and listless girl who had first met Stanief's envoys, but as the voyage proceeded she grew each day more rose-tinted, more daintily radiant and content. She had a little way of suddenly blushing and smiling, as if at some delightful secret of her own not to be carelessly spoken.

On the last day at sea she chose Allard's arm for her daily promenade up and down the deck. This honor was eagerly desired by the gentlemen, old and young alike, but she had shown a decided preference for the veteran Admiral; or one of her ladies; if the sea were sufficiently calm. Allard no longer wore the scarf, but she had paused before him demurely.

"Your arm is better, monsieur?"

"Madame, it is quite well."

"Then, if you do not fear to injure it——"

And with that they were pacing dignifiedly down the shining deck, under a score of envious eyes.

"To-morrow we arrive, monsieur."

"In a happy hour for our country and the Grand Duke Feodor, madame."

"He thinks so?"

"Princess, can you doubt it?" evaded Allard; who himself had many doubts, remembering Stanief's grim sarcasms on the subject of being given the care of a twenty-year-old girl when his life was already one of crowded task and peril.

Some trouble in his manner communicated itself to the small hand fluttering on his sleeve.

"I do not want to doubt," she said. "I do not. Monsieur in that old English legend—have you ever thought how wise King Arthur would have been, if instead of sending Lancelot to Lady Guinevere in his place, he had himself gone to meet her in Lancelot's guise?"

"Why, I never did think," Allard acknowledged merrily. "But certainly he would have been much wiser, madame."

He regarded her in bright question which drew the answer of her flush.

"Do not modern King Arthurs ever choose the wiser course?" she faltered.

"Perhaps they are too busy and hampered, madame, as the ancient king may have been also. Since I have lived at a court, I have altered my ideas on such subjects. I never saw any one who worked so hard as the regent. He has set himself a splendid task, and splendidly he carries it on."

Iria's expression clouded slightly; the glance she stole at her companion was puzzled and full of dawning terror.

"Yet he might leave it, a little while, monsieur."

"Madame, to leave it for one day might topple down the careful building of months."

Her left hand went to her heart.

"Monsieur, we arrive to-morrow; it would not be kind, just to play with me."

Allard met her appealing eyes with candid amazement.

"Princess, what have I said? *I* venture to play with your highness!"

"Then, the grand duke is waiting over there?" she flung out her hand toward the north.

Even then he had no conception of her mistake.

"Surely, madame; where else?" he wondered.

The Gentle Princess made no exclamation, no reproach. Only her head drooped again and shivering she drew the floating veil about her face.

"I am tired, monsieur," she gasped. "Will you take me back?"

"Madame, most unintentionally I have offended you. Let me beg forgiveness and ask how."

"No, no; no one has done wrong. I myself was—absurd. I am not angry, monsieur; only tired."

They walked back, Allard completely bewildered and uncomprehending. By her chair Iria paused and gave him her hand with a smile whose sweetness was beyond tears.

"Thank you, Monsieur Allard," she said. "Perhaps we will still be friends, over there. You are going home, but I go a stranger to a strange place; I meant no more than that."

She was like Theodora, Allard thought, deeply moved. Surely Stanief would be gentle with her gentleness.

The next morning they landed.

CHAPTER X:

A STANIEF'S OWN.

It was a pity that amidst all the gorgeous ceremony and confusion of welcome, Iria did not see the warm affection of Stanief's greeting to Allard.

Yet Stanief was faultlessly courteous, even kind in his grave manner. It might have been merely that he was so different from her fancies of the last days.

Upon the afternoon before her wedding-day, she saw Stanief alone for the first time.

After all it was not really alone. The Emperor had been chatting with her on the great glass-enclosed balcony, and as Stanief came toward them, he rose with a significant smile and went back to the reception-hall.

Stanief took the chair beside his fiancée and looked at her; this the first moment when he could do so without feeling himself the cynosure of all curious eyes. He had read perfectly the terror under her mute passivity, the shrinking of her tiny frost-cold hand from his touch, and he pitied her with all his heart.

"Princess," he said gently, "we have seen so little of each other until now, nor will again until after to-morrow. May I say something which has been in my thoughts since we met yesterday?"

"As you will, monseigneur," she murmured.

"I think it is as you will," Stanief corrected, smiling in spite of himself. "But I accept the permission. Will you forgive me if I have imagined that you feared me, princess?"

Iria raised her topaz eyes to his in complete dismay.

"Monseigneur, you are angry——"

The sentence broke; those firm, steadily tranquil eyes of his caught and held hers.

"Angry? Why? But I am sorry, deeply sorry for the net of policy which has enmeshed us both and left me no power of freeing you. And I would do all possible, princess, to make this less hard for you. There is no need to be afraid of me in any way. I do not know what they have told you of me; if I govern the Empire severely, it is that order may come from chaos, no more. Of what else I may be accused——"

"Monseigneur!"

He smiled again at her tone, rather sadly.

"Oh, I know my enemies. But such things have no place between you and me. Gerald Allard was of your suite; perhaps he could have told you that I am not all harshness."

She snatched her gaze from his and blushed as he had never seen a woman blush before; the heavy crimson staining her very forehead.

"He did tell me—that, monseigneur."

"Then I would ask you to trust me, princess. I am not a reigning sovereign, there is no reason why you should not keep with you the ladies of

There was a composed stateliness worthy of both in the gesture with which he extended his small hand in greeting.

your own country whom you prefer. If you desire, I will have the Emperor ask your mother to remain with you for a few months."

Iria shook her head.

"You are good to me, monseigneur," she faltered. "I will stay with you, please."

He understood, knowing the lady in question.

"Thank you," he answered, and after a moment, "A Stanief guards his own; so much, at least, our race has of loyalty. And to guard you all I can, that is all I claim. There are enough serious troubles, princess, without adding the artificial one of fear. If there is sorrow to you in this marriage, it is beyond my cure; but rest quietly in my guardianship."

The shadow of a sob crossed Iria's sensitive face, she looked up at him bravely and gratefully.

"You are good," she said hurriedly. "I never hoped you would be like this to me, monseigneur. No one ever thought of me so carefully before, never. But it is right to tell you, *because* you are so good. I know that you did not wish this marriage either, we are alike so. Baron Dalmorov informed me this morning."

"I am infinitely indebted to Baron Dalmorov," observed Stanief, his dark brows contracting in an expression that might have terrified into flight Iria's new-found confidence, if she had not been absorbed in her confession.

"I was not hurt, monseigneur; it made it easier, to know. And now I can tell you; I, I hate secrets. There was some one—oh, some one quite impossible and who does not care for me at all. He does not dream I ever thought, like that. But I fancied he was some one else—I misunderstood. It was not his fault in any way. I had to tell you, monseigneur; it seemed to me right."

Stanief leaned forward and laid his hand over the cold ones folded in her lap. He had never before believed that a woman could be frank, never imagined one who hated secrets, and not the most accomplished coquette could have devised a means of moving him so profoundly.

"All my life I shall remember that you gave me your confidence, Iria," he answered, with exquisite delicacy and respect. "So far I am happier than you; I love no one. Have no doubt, no dread of anything I can save you. Some good may come of all this, how can we tell? And at least there is no need of making it worse by not understanding. You will not shrink so much from to-morrow, now?"

She met his eyes, helpless as a child in the great reaction; his warm clasp seemed to melt the chill despair of the last days, a little color came back to her cheek and something flashed rainbowlike upon her lashes.

"Not now," she sighed quiveringly. "Thank you, monseigneur."

Stanief raised her hand to his lips, and presently they went back to the duquesa. After which he went in search of Adrian.

The Emperor was talking to Allard when his cousin came up to the alcove where they were ensconced, and he sat motionless with astonishment at sight of Stanief's steel-hard glance and compressed lip.

"Cousin?" he exclaimed, daunted in spite of himself.

Allard had risen at the approach, but Stanief did not regard him and Adrian gave no permission to retire.

"Sire," Stanief said, in the markedly quiet tone which came with his rare anger, "it is frequently your Imperial Majesty's pleasure to submit me and my affairs to discussion or criticism of Baron Dalmorov. I have made no complaint, I make none now, but there is a limit to such endurance. The lady who is to be my wife——"

Allard moved involuntarily, Adrian raised his hand in swift protest.

"Cousin, I assure you——"

Stanief saluted him formally.

"Sire, I have just learned that Baron Dalmorov has had the tact to inform the Princess Iria that I was marrying her under compulsion and against my will. This insult to madame, this falsehood——"

"Cousin!"

"This falsehood, sire—since having met the princess, it is my earnest desire to have the honor of her hand—this is too much. Baron Dalmorov is your attendant, I request your justice, if your Majesty denies it——"

"Well, cousin?" Adrian asked mechanically, rather in stupor than challenge.

Stanief's usually veiled glance glinted clear and ice-cold.

"Sire, Dalmorov shall account to me; and I to you later."

Allard, familiar with both, bit his lip in an agony of anxiety. For an instant Adrian wavered, then his eyes fell, beaten down by the other's.

"Whatever you wish," he conceded, docilely as Iria herself could have spoken. "He had no right, no excuse from me. Go bid Dalmorov come here, Allard."

The surrender was complete. Relieved and surprised, Allard obeyed, hazarding a guess that the Emperor's own fondness for Iria had influenced his answer.

But Adrian had not lived ten months with his regent without learning more than a childish love of command. He looked up again at the stately figure which towered over him, glittering in the semi-barbaric magnificence of dress demanded by etiquette.

"Come near me, Feodor," he urged, with a gesture of invitation to the chair at his side.

"Thank you, sire."

Adrian surveyed him, then stooped to the first apology of his life, however imperiously spoken.

"I never told any one at all of your unwillingness to marry Iria, Feodor. If it is known, it is because you yourself seized every possible delay. Come here; I do not wish Dalmorov to find you standing there."

Stanief complied, and Adrian laid a hand on his sleeve.

"Then you love Iria, after all?" he asked, with hesitating curiosity.

"Love? In twenty-four hours? Hardly, sire; but I guard my own."

The young Emperor lifted his head no less proudly.

"And so do I, cousin. Dalmorov shall satisfy you."

Half an hour after Iria returned to the suite appointed to her and her mother, she received a visit from Baron Dalmorov. A very different Dalmorov from the malicious, self-confident gentleman of the morning, and who offered her so abject an apology for his mistaken and untrue statement regarding the Grand Duke's attitude, that the Gentle Princess was quite distressed. She sent him away reassured and apparently grateful, and then fell to connecting events. Recollecting Stanief's expression at her *naive* quotation, and the carriage of his head as he had moved across the reception-hall to Adrian, she had no difficulty in divining the reason for Dalmorov's sudden contrition. But Stanief's strength no longer chilled her with terror; instead she stood with relief behind its shelter.

There was a ball at the palace that night. Stanief never danced, but every one else did, and the Emperor opened the evening with the princess as his partner. It was obvious to all why Stanief had been forced to this marriage, whenever Adrian was seen with Iria; the boy so evidently liked—indeed loved her. And the fifteen-year-old autocrat was usually considered to be without affections.

Near the end of the evening Stanief came across Allard, who was leaning against a flower-wreathed pillar and watching the dancers with grave unseeing eyes. The other studied him for an instant, then laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Gerald, I have scarcely seen you to-night. You look troubled."

Allard started and turned, his face brightening warmly.

"I am not dancing to-night, monseigneur," he explained. "That is all."

"Why not?"

The gray eyes fell.

"I was—a bit out of sorts, perhaps."

Stanief stood silent, his own expression becoming very somber. Allard waited quietly; he indeed bore the

stamp of fatigue in his pallor and the dark circles beneath his eyes.

"It is a tangled skein, this life of ours," Stanief said, at last, "and not wholly of our own spinning. You are with the Emperor to-night?"

"Every night now, monseigneur."

"Then I may not see you until morning. Good night, Gerald."

Allard smiled with the cordial brilliancy that always sprang in response to his name on Stanief's lips.

"Good night, monseigneur," he answered lovingly.

The next morning, with all elaborate ceremony, the marriage took place. It was remarked that when the princess stood up—in as much snowy satin, old lace and pearl as could be crowded upon one small feminine figure—opposite Stanief in the gigantic cathedral, that her wide eyes never left his face and she seemed to find support in his composure. And when they came down the aisle together, her little white-gloved fingers clung to the white sleeve of his uniform as if there alone she touched some reality in the bewildering panorama.

"Did you ever see the edelweiss growing on a ledge of some ice-fringed granite cliff?" whispered the volatile Vasili in Allard's ear. "Look, pray, at our grand duchess."

"The edelweiss is safe, at least," Allard replied soberly. "Perhaps safer than the cliff."

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE REGENT'S STUDY.

Stanief was writing; writing steadily, placidly, his pen rustling faintly as it slipped across the paper. The ruddy glow of an open fire seemed to nestle around the writer, as if its quivering pink radiance was a warning or a shield.

It was like another presence in the room, that fire, to the man behind the curtain. He watched it also as he crept stealthily forward, clutching more tightly the object in his hand. A man of the people, shabby, gaunt, unkempt, he stole out into the regent's study; stepping cautiously on the gleaming floor or treacherously soft rugs which slipped beneath his unaccustomed feet. From the velvet hangings he gained the shelter of a tall Vernis-Martin cabinet and crouched in its shadow, shaking from head to foot with nervous tremors.

Stanief worked on undisturbed; once he paused to choose another pen, and the intruder cowered to the floor in abject fear. But the writing was resumed without alarm. After a few moments the man again moved forward, this time on his hands and knees, until he reached the end of a high-sided leather couch. There he halted again.

There never was a clock that ticked so loudly, so insistently as the slim onyx timepiece above the hearth; a clock whch set its beats so exactly to the beat of a man's hurrying pulse. Once the man on the floor touched his chest curiously as if to be quite certain whether it was his heart or indeed the swaying pendulum which sounded through the quiet place. A little farther must still be gone, not much; reassured, he moved nearer.

The glowing fire wavered giddily across Stanief's bent head, seeking in vain for a hint of brown in the fine black hair; hair, the man noted dully, which had a slight ripple and a tendency to lie in tiny curls where it touched the neck. If one struck there? Or lower, between the broad shoulders——

Stanief leaned back and selected a cigarette from the tray on the writing-table. The man by the chair darted forward and struck once, from behind.

The knife crashed ringing to the floor as Stanief's quicker movement met his assailant's. The man cried out sharply as the slender, strong white hands closed on his wrists and the superior strength forced him to his knee beside the desk.

"Clumsily attempted," commented the level voice. "Have you any more weapons, *mon ami?*"

"Excellency, Highness, pardon—I know no French."

Stanief shrugged his shoulders and

lapsed into the language of the country.

"I asked if you had other weapons, but it does not matter."

He deliberately transferred both captive wrists to the grasp of his right hand and with his left opened a drawer of the desk. The man made no effort to free himself. He submitted passively when Stanief produced a pair of handcuffs and snapped them in place.

"Stand up, and farther off," came the contemptuous command. "You need not try to escape; the guard is within call. I might have had you arrested half an hour ago when I first saw you."

"Highness, how—why——"

Stanief answered the stupefied gaze, coldly amused.

"Because it interested me to watch your attempt. I keep a mirror on my desk, not being without experience. Who sent you to kill me?"

"Royal Highness, my brother was hung last week."

"As you this week. Well?"

The man winced.

"Royal Highness, we wanted freedom. They tell us that while your Highness lives it cannot be; the country is too firmly held and too content. So we strive to act in time."

"Your brother was executed for an attempt to kill me?"

"Serenity, he worked in the palace kitchen and put poison in a cup of chocolate."

"I remember. He was tried; I had nothing to do with his case." He paused, considering, and the other stared at him in fascination. "Before I ring to have you removed, have you anything to say?"

"Gracious Highness, pardon!"

Stanief regarded him with scornful amazement.

"Pardon? You are mad, *mon ami.* Why should I pardon you; you do not interest me further? Go face your trial, my share in the incident is ended."

"Highness, mercy—I am afraid. Not that—I will——"

"What?"

"Buy," he offered desperately. "Royalty, not to sell my comrades—who are we in your sight?—there is some one else, some one of the court who wishes your death."

Stanief stopped with his finger on the bell and bent his keen eyes on the livid face. It was not a pleasant spectacle, this sordid, trembling figure in his firelight, but an uglier specter loomed behind it.

"Go on, if you choose," he directed. "You have my permission."

"Highness, not my comrades. But he is not of us, he urges us here to fail and die. You are the master; Highness, his name for grace."

"I promise you nothing. Certainly not your liberty."

"No, no, but life! Highness," he made a movement to throw himself at the other's feet, but drew back before the decided negative. "Highness, he is the Baron Sergius Dalmorov."

"Ah," observed the regent, and said nothing more for an instant.

His all given, the man waited feverishly, not daring to speak except by his imploring gaze. But Stanief finally pushed the button without vouchsafing a reply.

"Dimitri," he said curtly, to the officer who responded to the summons, "take this man and have him imprisoned until I send for him again. Understand me; there is no charge against him at present, simply he is a prisoner at my pleasure."

The officer saluted in silence, however amazed at the presence in Stanief's study of one who certainly had not passed the door, and in silence marshaled his dazed captive backward to the threshold. There he halted and again saluted.

"Monsieur Allard awaits the honor of being received by your Royal Highness," he announced.

"Very good; admit Monsieur Allard."

"Highness," faltered the prisoner once more.

Dimitri favored him with a scandalized stare, jerked him unceremoniously out of the door, and administered a

shake that almost sent him into Allard's arms.

"More respect, animal," he ordered explosively. "Pig of a peasant! Oh, a thousand pardons, Monsieur Allard; pray enter."

Allard laughed and passed on, giving the prisoner a compassionate glance that altered to one of surprise and distrust at sight of his face. But he asked no questions, having learned many things in the course of his life in the Empire. Adrian himself had first given his favorite dry advice to see nothing that did not concern him.

Stanief had resumed his writing; at Allard's entrance he looked up to nod pleasantly toward a chair, and continued his work without speaking. The two were accustomed to one another; smiling, Allard sat down and let his head sink against the high back of the cushioned seat.

After a while Stanief laid down the pen, pushed aside the completed task, and surveyed his companion unobserved. Twice the regent moved as if to speak, then changed the intention and remained mute. The expression that forced its way through his locked composure of feature was not gentle; it was as if he struggled fiercely with some emotion and felt it wrench and writhe beneath the surface of self-control. But in spite of his will, his dark brows tangled, the black velvet eyes glinted hardly behind their deceptive lashes. And when he finally spoke, his voice carried a tone never before used to Allard.

"Gerald, what is wrong?" he demanded.

Startled, the other looked up.

"Nothing, monseigneur," he answered, rather wearily.

Stanief's fingers closed sharply on one of the ivory toys scattered over the desk.

"That is not true," he contradicted. "Kindly say so if you do not wish to explain; I am not a child to be put off with a light word. Something has been wrong with you ever since your return from Spain."

Too assured of their friendship for resentment or to attribute the tone to anything except interest in his affairs, Allard smiled even while changing color with pain.

"I have you, always, monseigneur," he said. "If I have no one else, at least I can rest in content with you."

The paper-knife snapped in Stanief's grasp.

"Thank you," he retorted, with an accent worthy of his cousin. "I believe I asked you to explain."

The unconscious Allard pushed the bright hair from his forehead, his eyes on the ruddy unrest of the flames.

"Of course I meant to tell you some time, monseigneur," he mused aloud. "But it seemed a bit cowardly to burden you with my troubles; you could not help them and you have so many of your own. It was not a time to speak of such a thing during your wedding, and as the weeks passed by it grew harder and harder to speak of at all. I tried not to betray myself, but I am rather a bad actor. If it were only I who suffered—— The journey to Spain, for madame——"

He paused. Stanief gazed at him with an expression as somberly dangerous as ever wore one of his dangerous house.

"The journey to Spain, monsieur?" he repeated.

Aroused at last to a strangeness in his manner, Allard turned to him in surprise.

"During the journey to Spain, monseigneur, this came for me," he replied simply, and drew forth a letter which he laid before the other.

Stanief picked it up, himself confronted by the unexpected. Allard resumed his seat and averted his head as the rustling paper unfolded.

It was so sweetly calm a letter, a letter written by one in the evening of life and itself breathing an evening hush and gray twilight repose.

Robert had not been well for a long time, Aunt Rose wrote most delicately. After Gerald had left for South America so abruptly, his younger brother had fretted and chafed against his own quiet life. Even the engagement to

Theodora had failed to cheer him, or cure his strange restlessness and abstraction. About six months after Gerald's departure, he had been found unconscious on the veranda, lying among the crumpled morning newspapers. An illness followed, and after recovering from that he never seemed to grow quite strong. In the third year of Gerald's absence, when the preparations were being made for the long-delayed wedding, he again fell ill. The morning they received Gerald's letter from the *Nadeja*, he rallied wonderfully. Asking to have the letter himself, he read it again and again, then sent them all away while he rested. An hour later they had found him resting indeed; his cheek upon the letter and the old sorrow smoothed away from his boyish face. Theodora had borne it very well. They were tranquilly content together, now, and sent their earnest love to Gerald in his new life.

Stanief laid down the letter very gently.

"Nearly two years," Allard said, his head still turned away. "So long since Robert died. I did not write at once from here; I thought they knew of me, and I wanted to gain a little real life to tell. I suppose the women did not know how to reach me here; Bertie would have had no difficulty. But it was over, and there seemed no use of troubling you."

Stanief rose and came around the writing-table to lay both hands on the other's shoulders.

"I beg your pardon, Gerald," he said, earnestly and gravely. "I spoke to you just now as I never will again, come what may. I have my own griefs, less patiently endured than yours; and I misunderstood."

"I did not notice," Allard answered, with perfect truth. "You are always like no one else, monseigneur. I am glad you know, very glad. You see, it is not only that I have myself lost Robert, but that I have taken him from Theodora. I wanted so much happiness for her, and now—it was all wrong. Let us talk of something else, please."

Stanief turned away to find a cigarette, and pushed the tray toward his companion.

"My last cigarette was never lighted," he observed, the change of tone complete. "Did you see that particularly disagreeable fellow countryman of mine who went out in Dimitri's charge? He tried to kill me just before you arrived."

"He——"

"Oh, that is nothing novel. In fact it becomes monotonous. Only he varied the routine by declaring Dalmorov the instigator of all this."

Effectually aroused, Allard sat up.

"Dalmorov," he echoed incredulously, "to stoop so far! Yet I remember; I saw him talking with your prisoner the other night. I was coming from the club with Rosal and Linovitch, when our acetylene search-light fell across the two in an angle of the cathedral wall."

"So? He is imprudent."

"You will accuse him, arrest him?"

"My dear Gerald; on the word of a wretched peasant? I shall do nothing so impulsive. But I will perfect the chain, and then——" he offered a match serenely. "Why should he not pay? Moreover, he is dangerous to the Emperor. Before my power passes from me I will annihilate this gentleman, whether Adrian wishes it or not; and then contentedly lay down my borrowed scepter."

"The Emperor——"

"The Emperor may do as he will, afterward. He is fond of his Dalmorov."

"I am not so sure, monseigneur; he plays with him."

Stanief smiled.

"My youthful cousin is a kitten for whom we are all toy mice, Gerald," he replied. "Which recalls me to the fact that the hour for my visit to him is approaching."

"And recalls me to my errand. The Emperor requests that her Royal Highness the Grand Duchess will come to him this morning, if this will not derange her plans."

"You have told madame?"

Stooping with the fierceness of pain restrained he touched his lips to her hair.

"No, monseigneur. I thought perhaps you——" he looked at Stanief interrogatively.

"Would accompany her? Perhaps."

He touched the bell, and the long regard in which he enveloped Allard held many blended emotions besides its affection.

"Has madame yet gone to drive, Dimitri?" he inquired of that attendant.

"Her Royal Highness at this moment descends the stairs."

"Say to her that I would be glad to see her here, now, if she is at leisure."

Dimitri vanished hastily. An instant later he reopened the door, and Iria came noiselessly across the threshold with the exotic, Andalusian grace that made her least movement a delight.

Both gentlemen rose at her entrance. Coloring faintly, she inclined her head to Allard, but crossed to Stanief; lifting her eyes to his with a certain delicate confidence and trust.

"You sent for me, monseigneur?" she questioned, in her rippling Southern voice.

"I asked you to come," he corrected. "Monsieur Allard has a message for you."

She turned docilely to Allard without leaving Stanief's side.

"For me, monsieur?"

Stanief looked from one to the other. Very lovely was the young girl in her trailing blue velvet and furs; her golden-brown hair clustering in full, soft waves under her large hat, her golden-brown eyes warm with expectation. Iria had acquired a dainty poise, not less gentle, but more assured, during these months of emancipation and freedom under the regent's protection. Allard gazed at her with frank admiration and friendliness as he explained:

"Madame, the Emperor requests the happiness of your presence this morning, if the visit will cause no disturbance of your plans."

Her dimpling smile responded to a demand sufficiently familiar. Adrian's love for her had long ago outlived surprise and become an accepted fact.

"Thank you, monsieur," she answered, and again looked up at Stanief. "You are going, monseigneur? We may go together?"

"I intended to ask it of you; if you will wait an instant for me to arrange these papers."

Allard saluted them quietly and withdrew. Like all the rest of the city, he fancied them very happy in each other.

Iria sank down in an armchair and loosened the furs under her round white chin, laying the huge muff in her lap. Quite innocently and without shyness she followed Stanief's movements as he tossed into a drawer the writing upon which he had been engaged and dropped on top the thin keen knife left from the recent conflict.

"Monseigneur," she said, at last.

Stanief winced ever so slightly; there were times when the formal title fell like a drop of acid on his nerves.

"Madame la Duchesse?" he retorted.

Iria laughed out in her surprise, all unconscious of his meaning.

"Monseigneur, are you going to send Marya away from me?"

"I! What have I to do with your ladies, Iria? Keep or dismiss them as you choose."

"Marya cried this morning, telling me that last night Baron Dalmorov warned her of your intention. He said that the Emperor would object to the sister of Count Ormiev remaining at court, so you would dismiss her. But I told Marya that you knew how much I cared for her, and would say that to the Emperor."

"Some day Dalmorov will learn discretion," Stanief commented, almost too indolently, "it is nearly time. The Emperor did speak to me of the Countess Marya, and I pointed out to him that her brother's misconduct did not affect the matter in the least. Also that you governed your own household."

"But you govern us all, monseigneur," said the Gentle Princess, most naturally. "I was sure it would be all right, somehow; I told Marya that no one who belonged to you need be afraid."

He paused in front of her abruptly.

"Then you are not sorry you trusted me yourself, Iria? You are not sorry any longer that chance placed you in my keeping?"

She leaned forward across the muff, her eyes suddenly wet in their sincerity.

"Oh, *no*," she denied with energy. "No, monseigneur. I have never been sorry since that first day on the winter-balcony when you spoke to me so wonderfully. You—you are so *good*, monseigneur."

Stanief looked into those clear eyes for a long moment, his own glance veiled. Then he gently took one of the little gloved hands and lifted it to his lips.

"I seem to have been born for just that, to guard what is not mine," he said, the sadness of his voice masked by its even control. "I wish I could hope that my other ward would tell me so much, some day. Come, let us visit the Emperor."

She rose, softly flushed and smiling, yet vaguely troubled by his manner.

"The Emperor?" she ventured. "He is a shadow, monseigneur; you are not satisfied with him?"

"What do you know of shadows, who are all sunshine? If I imagine a cloud on the imperial horizon, it is still no larger than that bit of lace in your hand. Adrian is—Adrian."

Together they moved to the door.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TURN IN THE ROAD.

It was a few weeks later, when the tardy spring was awakening reluctantly from the long sleep, that Stanief's cloud drew nearer and gained darker substance.

It was a question of taxes which made the first rift between the cousins. The tax had been imposed during the period of readjustment; now, owing to the regent's skilled government, it was no longer necessary and he proposed to remove it. To the amazement of all concerned, Adrian chose to object.

Plainly enough Stanief saw Dalmorov's influence behind the opposition, and saw himself bound to persistence both by policy and implied promise to the people. Not yet had the tax been removed, but he courteously had reminded Adrian that no one possessed the power of interference with the measure. The result had been inevita-

ble; Adrian sulked and the regent's enemies furtively rejoiced.

Meanwhile the suite of the sullen young sovereign suffered much from his caprices; until finally Iria and Allard were the only two his caustic tongue spared and his ill humor passed by. And at last he even contrived to give Allard the sting of reawakened memories.

"Allard," he remarked one morning, "you never told me more than just that you were an American. From what State are you?"

"I am a Californian, sire," was the reply.

"Come show me where, in the atlas, *pour s'amuser*. Your California is not small, if I recollect."

Allard came over obediently and found the map, pointing out the city remembered so sadly well.

"There, sire, near that little bay. Our place lay beyond the town; we called the house Sun-Kist."

"The house was near the bay?"

"Very near. We used to sail and fish there. Just here lay the yacht-club, where Robert kept his motor-boat——" He broke off and turned away more abruptly than strict etiquette allowed.

Adrian deliberately drew his pencil through the name on the map.

"Robert?" he queried.

"Robert Allard, sire, my younger brother. He died two years ago."

"Soon after you came here, then?"

"While I was on the *Nadeja*, sire, making the voyage."

"Have you no other relatives there?"

"Yes; my aunt Mrs. Leslie, and my cousin her daughter."

Adrian studied his companion's pallor with a certain scientific interest, idly scribbling on the margin of the atlas without regarding what he wrote.

"You regret your home?" he inquired.

Allard bit his lip to steady its quiver.

"There is nothing to call me home, sire," he replied. "My brother is not living, and my cousin, who was betrothed to him, has no wish or need of me. I think I never want to see the place as it is now. My life is here."

"You loved her," Adrian said calmly. "Do not look like that, Allard;" he actually smiled. "I have not watched you with the ladies of the court without learning that some woman sat at the door of your heart."

Allard wavered between exasperation and helpless dismay at the other's acuteness; there were occasions when his Imperial Majesty was almost uncanny. But he ended by remaining silent, as usual.

"You and Iria," Adrian added, after a moment during which his thin, high-bred face hardened strangely, "you two at least are transparent, and free from under-thoughts. Allard——"

"Sire?"

"I have been kind to you, if to no one else, I think. Perhaps I have guarded you from more pitfalls set by envy than you can conceive, or would credit. And you have served me, not Feodor or another. If you were forced to the choice now, would you follow the regent or me?"

The question could not have been more unexpected or more difficult. Allard caught his breath, utterly at a loss. Deceive Adrian he would not. To forsake Stanief even in appearance was not to be considered, and yet to exasperate the jealous and exacting Emperor still further against his cousin was bitterly unnecessary.

"Sire——"

"Go on."

But he could not go on. his ideas in hopeless confusion.

"I am waiting."

"Sire, the regent," he admitted with desperate candor.

Adrian laid his pencil carefully on the map and closed the atlas, saying nothing at all. Allard flushed to the roots of his fair hair.

"Not that I am ungrateful," he protested in hot distress. "And *against* you I would serve no one, not even him. I would hold my life a slight thing to give either of you. Sire," he took a step forward, his ardent gaze seeking the other's comprehension, "before the brother I loved, the woman I love, before any call, I would follow the regent. He—— I have no words for it. It is not that my loyalty to your Majesty is less, but that he claims me against the world."

"Happy Feodor," said Adrian coolly. "Do not distress yourself, Allard; if you had told me anything else I should not have believed you. Why," he suddenly lifted to the amazed American a glance all cordial, "it is pleasant to find loyalty to any one still exists, to find one rock in this shaking quagmire. Here is the regent; go down the room and find a book to read until we finish."

Dazed, Allard mechanically obeyed so far as to move down the apartment and pick up a book. But keen anxiety for the friend he could not aid kept his attention on the interview that followed, although beyond his hearing.

Stanief crossed to his ward with the dignified formality never relaxed between them, and bent over the offered hand. No shade of expression foretold the announcement both knew he was come to make, nor was Adrian on his part less impassive.

"Iria did not come to-day?" was the nonchalant greeting.

"No, sire. She was fatigued after last night's reception, and we did not understand your desire."

"Oh, I expressed none, except as it is always pleasant to see her. Madame was adorable last night, a very flower of her delicious South. It occurred to me that you yourself, cousin, did not appear to feel so well as usual."

"I was tired, sire," he replied simply.

Adrian frowned with some other emotion than anger, darting a swift regard at Stanief; who leaned back in his chair with a listlessness rare in him. Adrian turned away his head half impatiently, and did not speak at once.

"You devote too close an attention to state affairs, cousin," he rejoined. "Next year we will relieve you of them."

The accent was more than the words; together they brought Stanief's color.

"I shall resign my charge most willingly, sire," he answered with dignity.

"I am glad to hear it; I fancied you might miss the regal game and find life monotonous. You have taken the task so completely from my hands that it causes no surprise to find you are wearied. I admit that you have spared me even the fatigue of consulting my wishes or opinions in regard to the government."

"The accusation is hardly just, sire. A suggestion of yours has never been disregarded or failed of its serious effect."

"Ah?" drawled Adrian, with his most aggravating incredulity in the inflection.

Stanief raised his lashes and met the other's eyes steadfastly. Both comprehended the situation perfectly; comprehended the imminent break Adrian was forcing.

"Because," Adrian resumed, fixing his eyes on the table before him, "I have been told otherwise. I am rejoiced to learn the truth from you, cousin; especially as a rumor reached me this morning that a certain tax had been removed, against my distinct wish. You doubtless know the measure of which I speak. I am glad to find it is not so."

"Pardon, sire; it is so," was the calm reply.

"The tax is removed?"

"Yes, sire."

The Adrian of two years before would have burst into furious passion; the one of to-day simply rose and walked to the nearest window. Stanief necessarily rose also, and stood by his chair, waiting.

But Adrian made no scene. Probably no one realized less than the regent himself how much the example of his own self-control had taught of the same quality to his ward. When the young Emperor came back, only his extreme pallor betrayed the tempest within.

"Very well," he said resolutely. "Amuse yourself, my cousin; I can wait. Eleven months, is it not?"

The break, and the menace. Stanief saluted him quietly.

"A trifle less than eleven months, sire. May I assume your Imperial

Majesty's permission to retire? I suppose it is scarcely worth while to reiterate the arguments as to the necessity of my action."

"Scarcely. Do not let me detain you from your many affairs, cousin. Ah, I believe Dalmorov is waiting out there; let me tax your courtesy so far as to ask you to send him to me."

He extended his hand carelessly; no longer as a sign of friendliness, but as a compulsion of homage.

"It is for you to command, sire," was Stanief's proudly unmoved response.

"Thank you," he acknowledged composedly, and watched the other go.

Dalmorov entered presently, radiant with satisfaction, but Allard could have borne witness that the baron passed no pleasant hour with his irritable and irritating master. Like the fleck of a lash, Adrian's tongue touched each weakness and stung each exposed hope of the courtier three times his age, until even the distrait American found himself compelled to amusement.

Stanief did not ride home that morning with the cheerful Vasili and bored Rosal, who awaited him. As he came down the wide steps between the usual parting, obsequious crowds, a girl leaned from a victoria that stood in the place of his own carriage; Iria, with opposite her the pale young Countess Marya.

"Will you ride with me, monseigneur?" invited the Gentle Princess, with her deliciously confiding glance and smile. "We were on the Promenade, and I thought perhaps you would have finished——"

A knot of early daffodils was tucked in her girdle, the spring breeze fluttered a bright strand of crinkled bronze against her brighter cheek; all the youth of the year was in the happy face she lifted to him. Stanief paused with his foot on the step to look at her.

"Thank you," he answered. "I wonder if you will ever come for me again, Iria, after I have finished here indeed."

An innocent surprise and pleasure dawned in her expression.

"I will come every day, if you like, monseigneur," she offered. "I did not know you cared."

He took the seat beside her, with a courteous salute to Marya.

"You are gracious, as always. I did not mean exactly that, although you cannot guess how pleasant it was to find you here to-day. Live your pretty routine and fancies, Duchess of Dreams, and give me the alms of time you cannot use."

They spoke in Iria's soft native tongue, which the Countess Marya did not understand and which Stanief had learned long before in some of the *Nadeja's* nomadic voyages. Always gentle to the gentle Iria, to-day his voice carried an added tenderness which stirred her to vague unrest and wistfulness.

"You do not mean that," she said, troubled. "My fancies—you cannot know how many of them are wishes that I might prove a little, only a little, of all your kindness makes me feel. I wish, how much I wish that I could do something for you."

The victoria was rolling through the busy, cheerful streets; vehicles making way for it in respectful haste, people saluting with more than mere formality and following the regent with grateful eyes. Stanief's city, Stanief's country, this; drawn by him out of anarchy into order, out of suffering into peace. The people knew, and he knew. He looked across it all now before answering, battling with fierce loneliness and rebellion.

"Iria, what I have done for you is nothing. You are my wife," there was no mockery in the quietly spoken word, "and claim all I can give. But, since we are alone except for each other and have been placed together, would you care to save my pride some day by stepping at my side out of this court? By giving me the dignity of holding my household above the wreck?"

Startled and dismayed, she turned to him.

"Monseigneur, I do not understand! You, *you* to speak of wreck! Oh, and you ask me that, you doubt?"

He laid his hand warningly on hers.

"We are under a hundred eyes, Iria. You live aloof from politics and intrigues, but yet you know my regency ends in a few months."

"You mean—the Emperor?"

"The Emperor has never trusted me, never forgiven me for the chance which set me as ruler of his country. And when he assumes command it will undoubtedly mean that I lay aside all you have seen of me, and retire a simple gentleman of leisure to my estates. No more will I play the regal game, as Adrian expressed it to-day. Could you brave that, Iria; to be no longer the center of a brilliant court? For Adrian will want to keep you, if you will stay."

The little hand under his turned to clasp his fingers; star-eyed, richly tinted with excitement, Iria leaned to him.

"With you, let me be with you. I am afraid of nothing with you, without you of everything. Oh, monseigneur, do you not see that what you lose are a man's desires, not a woman's? I shall miss nothing; it is only you who will grieve and regret."

"My dear, my dear," said Stanief unsteadily, and turned away his face before a new hope which outdazzled all the morning's pictured loss.

"It is so, only do not speak again of leaving me here. I love the Emperor; but I am afraid of him. And if he can treat you this way——"

"Hush; never blame him, however alone you fancy us. If you can help it, do not let him guess that I have told you of this. And for the rest, the fault is more Dalmorov's than his."

"I will not," she promised. And after a moment, "Some one else will follow you always, monseigneur."

He knew the answer before he asked the question, and the light went suddenly from his face.

"Who, Iria?"

"Monsieur Allard," she replied.

Stanief again looked across the teeming streets; it was as if a chill intangible mist stole up from the near-by river and drew its cold grayness between the two who sat side by side.

"Gerald is a loyal gentleman," he said without anger, "I value you both above all else. And I thank you for the household security which you have given to me, my poor child."

The carriage stopped in front of the quaintly splendid Palace Stanief. Iria lingered before accepting the regent's aid to descend, her delicate lip curving distressedly.

"Do not call me that, please," she begged. "Because you have made me very happy, monseigneur."

The perfume of her daffodils was about him, faint, virginal, bitter-sweet as her presence in his house. Stanief deliberately painted to himself the fierce delight of catching her in his arms, of pressing the little sunny head to him and crushing her sweet ignorance out of existence with one kiss she could never forget again. But his hand did not even close upon the small one resting in it.

"Then I have lived to some purpose," he responded serenely.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE INTERVENTION OF ADRIAN.

For Iria to attempt to hide a change of thought from the keen-eyed and sophisticated Adrian with his clairvoyant faculty of penetration, was as deliciously futile as for a flower to resolve to shut from the sun the drop of dew in its golden heart. A week after her morning drive with Stanief, when Iria was passing one of her usual hours with the Emperor, he coolly put his finger on her secret.

"You are not yourself, *cousine*," he observed. "What has Feodor been telling you of me?"

"Oh!" Iria exclaimed in distress, regarding her youthful sovereign with wide, astonished eyes.

Adrian smiled with his fine malice.

"Come, confess. Or shall I guess? I am ungrateful, unappreciative, and swayed by Dalmorov; not so? Moreover I am dangerous, and making my regent extremely uncomfortable."

"Oh, *no*, sire. He bade me never blame you, indeed. He said nothing like that," denied madame impetuously, then stopped short.

"Then what did he tell you?"

"But I was not to repeat," she pleaded.

This time Adrian laughed outright and leaned forward to capture one of the lily-leaf hands and lift it to his lips.

"You have not repeated, *cousine*," the inquisitor assured her. "I myself guessed. And since I appear to have guessed worse than the truth, you had better correct me. I will not tell Feodor."

She looked up at him then, flushing all over.

"If I tell you, sire," she retorted with pride, "I shall say so to monseigneur as soon as I see him. Must I speak?"

"I think you had better, *chère cousine*."

"Then I will try to remember, sire, because the truth is always much the best to know. And I am certain you would not ask me to hurt him. He asked me if I would be ready to go with him when the regency ended and you sent him from court. He said that you had never trusted him, and could not forgive him for the government forced upon him. That was all, indeed. Except that he did say you thought highly of Baron Dalmorov; and, and, a few words just for me."

Adrian passed his hand across his eyes as if to push back the hair from his forehead, and remained silent for a few seconds.

"If Feodor is not happy, he pays the penalty of having ruled," he returned, his strange unyouthful bitterness most repellent. "I am not happy, nor was my father, nor his father before him. And you would leave me to go with him, *cousine*? Think of it again. I offer you your household in the capital; until some day I marry, you will be still the first lady of my court. What has Feodor to give compared with all I hold for you? Will you stay?"

"But I am his wife," she answered simply. "How could I stay, sire?"

"You love him so?"

Iria grew quite pale, then raised her hands to her cheeks to cover the returning color that dyed even her temples.

"I—I do not know," she faltered, aghast at a question never asked even of herself. "I—no—he does not me——"

He stared at her, for once thoroughly amazed.

"He does not love you?" he echoed. "You do not know? Why, Iria——"

She flashed into the first and last anger he ever saw in her.

"You forced us to marry each other, sire. We did not want it, no!" she cried, and raised the little useless handkerchief to her eyes.

There was a pause, then Adrian dismissed the subject with a sentence that gave his companion food for thought during many a day to come.

"Poor Feodor," he said very compassionately. "Twice."

Iria recovered herself almost immediately and brought her gold and topaz eyes back to those of the Emperor.

"I would like to go, if I may, sire," she said.

"Are you offended with me, *cousine*?"

"Certainly not, sire."

He watched her fold the gleaming embroidery, tapping his fingers restlessly on the arm of his chair.

"You would go, and Allard," he mused aloud, "each after duty, a love, an aim. I wonder if there was ever but one who centered all such thoughts in me, who made me the axis of his world?"

He gave her the desired permission by rising.

"You are anxious to go, *cousine*. Allard!" he called. Then turning to Iria. "Allard will have the honor of accompanying you to the carriage."

"No!" protested Iria, but too late.

"No? You do not wish Allard's escort?" he demanded.

"Oh, yes, I—of course." She turned hurriedly from him, then looked back with a gesture of helpless bewilderment and distress. "I wish you had not spoken, sire; I wish you had not spoken."

And as the others came up, she passed her hand through Marya's arm and left Allard and Alexia to follow.

All that day Stanief was immersed in councils and affairs. Not until evening did he and Iria meet, when she stopped in his study on her way to the opera; where no less a cavalier than the Emperor was to take her husband's place.

Standing straight and slim before him, her head drooping under its weight of silken floss and spanning jewels, her soft throat and dimpled shoulders crossed and recrossed by the manifold strands of the wonderful Stanief pink pearls, she repeated the conversation of the morning. Repeated it, all except the last part. Her eyes downcast, her gloved fingers twisted nervously together, the rosy gems gleaming uneasily with her rapid breathing, it was the Iria of long ago he saw; the timid shrinking girl whom Allard had brought from Spain.

Sensitive as a woman to the change, Stanief gazed and listened, finding no explanation in the story she related.

"That is all?" he asked gently, when she ended.

"Yes," she said faintly. "All that matters, monseigneur."

"You," he hesitated for the right words. "You are not troubled, or displeased, Iria?"

She retreated a step, bending to gather round her the trailing satin and lace folds.

"No," she answered. "No, monseigneur. Good night."

Without his will, without his act, the delicate confidence between them was shattered. The frail, exquisite understanding that was too slight for friendship, too pale for love, had been destroyed.

When she had gone, he sat still for many moments.

"Adrian or Dalmorov," he decided. "I wonder——"

He touched the bell.

"Dimitri, you remember that I once placed in your charge a man found in this room?"

"Certainly, your Royal Highness."

"Have him brought to me; I am ready to see him."

Dimitri saluted and vanished. All unconsciously, Iria's taper, snowy fingers had touched the pieces on that grim chess-board, and moved them ever so slightly.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ORDEAL.

For Allard that last summer of the regency brought the hardest of all things for a loving heart to bear. No personal humiliation could have affected him so painfully as to see Stanief under the Emperor's stinging sarcasms and cold young insolence, to note the furtive words and glances of the men who still courted present power while predicting its future fall.

Never after that morning of the contest of wills between the cousins, did Adrian's unforgiving sullenness lessen or relent. Day after day the regent paid his formal visit and endured the ordeal with chill dignity. Day after day Adrian received him in the presence of Dalmorov or half a dozen young nobles of the capital; usually on the point of going out and so making the brief interview a mere farce. Only one courtesy the Emperor conceded to the self-respect of both; never did he make the least hint of menace or future reckoning except when the cousins were alone or with Allard. By inference alone could the rest of the court foretell the coming end.

And Dalmorov was radiant. His spare figure actually dilated and gained weight in these days of victory, his eyeglasses poised a trifle more superciliously before his pale eyes. As Stanief seldom met him except when Adrian's desire for both compelled, it was not surprising that in his presence that clash occurred.

It was after Stanief had passed an especially difficult and trying hour with the Emperor, an hour which left Allard's nerves in quivering exasperation. When at last the regent took leave, Adrian rose at the same time and crossed to a window with his nonchalant languor of movement.

"Bring me those glasses we were trying this morning, Allard," he directed.

"I want to see that ship entering the river."

But Allard did nothing of the kind. The fourth one present, Dalmorov, had just moved aside from the door with an indescribable smile and bow to the regent.

"I have the honor to wish your Royal Highness good morning," he said sweetly.

Stanief glanced down at him, outwardly unmoved by the neglect of a courtesy compelled by every rule of custom and etiquette; but before embarrassment was possible Allard sprang forward and himself held back the door.

"Thank you," Stanief said only, but his eyes met the gray ones in passing.

"Really, baron, for a diplomat you grow too absent-minded," commiserated Allard softly to his *vis-à-vis*. "One might have imagined you intended that his Royal Highness should open the door himself."

"Since Monsieur Allard has become so learned in etiquette, he might observe that the Emperor is waiting," Dalmorov retorted viciously.

Allard shot a glance at Adrian, who had turned in time to witness the whole scene.

"At least, if I offend, I am careful to offend one who can retaliate, baron," he flung back in an undertone, as he moved in quest of the article demanded.

"Who can, and whom you are in too insecure a position to provoke," Dalmorov sent after him, incautiously raising his tone with a bitter significance which the other failed to comprehend.

"When you are at leisure, gentlemen," Adrian's voice interposed coolly. "Dalmorov, I would suggest that you follow my cousin and explain your unfortunate lapse of memory. Allard, I believe I made a request."

There was little Allard could not have forgiven to Adrian for sending Dalmorov to make that apology.

"I beg a thousand pardons, sire," he answered contentedly as he crossed the room.

"I wonder," Adrian remarked, when the door had closed behind Dalmorov, "if you do things like that because you are an American."

Surprised, Allard smiled involuntarily.

"Perhaps, sire; we are rather *sans-gêne*."

"You misunderstand me," he corrected. "I mean, do you act as the others would not, because you are not my subject as they are."

Allard understood then, and the implied accusation stung him to hot anger.

"No, sire," he flashed. "I have not lived under your shelter and eaten your bread to hide beneath another flag when the scale turns. I am an American, yes, but I do not use my nationality as a cloak for cowardice. So far, I have become your subject by entering your service."

Not until long afterward did Allard read the slow, half-amused smile that rose to the surface of the Emperor's dark eyes.

"Very good, we will remember, Monsieur l'Americain," he returned, quite untroubled by the other's indignation. "Do not complain if some day I interfere with your affairs."

His affairs, Allard puzzled mentally. But he received no further explanation, and neither to him nor Dalmorov did Adrian again mention the incident.

Down his self-appointed path Stanief was moving steadfastly in those months. And the first treasure left behind, the hardest to resign, had been Iria's confidence. Locked within the old timidity, she avoided her husband whenever possible; hiding her eyes from him when necessity brought them together, coming no more to his study.

But there was one exception; every morning, after Stanief's visit to the palace, she waited for him in her carriage. Silent, her hands clasped in her lap, replying with hesitating monosyllables, she sat by his side during the drive home; one of her ladies opposite them.

So winter set its seal of silence on the river and snow-muffled streets before he realized the fading summer. With spring would end the regency.

"How many months now, cousin?" drawled the Emperor, returning from the races held upon the glittering ice of the river, and pausing on the steps of the palace to unclasp his too oppressive furs.

"Five, sire," answered the tranquil regent. "I believe I have to congratulate your Imperial Majesty upon the victories in to-day's sport."

"My horses? Ah, yes; this is my fortunate year. Thank you, cousin."

And Allard, in attendance, bit his lip until a tiny thread of crimson sprang beneath the pressure.

Faster and faster the beads were slipping from the chain; the path was straight to the end and very short.

CHAPTER XV.

AT THE GATES OF CHANGE.

Once again Stanief was alone in his study, on the morning when Allard made his first rebellion. It was so rare to see Allard excited and he was so vibrant with indignation as he stood before the other.

"Like that," he was declaring hotly, speaking English in his preoccupation. "And Dalmorov sneered, listening. 'My cousin is having his fine old country-place repaired, Allard, I am informed.' 'I know nothing, sire,' I said. 'He is very prudent,' he answered coolly. Monseigneur, I will not go back; I came here to tell you that. I am weary of watching it; I stay here with you. I can come here as I always hoped to do, giving to you, not asking. Let me finish, please. The Emperor has been generous to me, however little so to you, and I am modestly rich in my own right. Why, the pension accompanying that star and order he gave me after the attempt to kill him, that alone is more than my solitary life requires. It is my pride to have regained my independence, monseigneur; to be able to come to you free and offer to do your secretary's work, Vasili's, what you choose; but to give it as a service of love. Long ago, on the *Nadeja*, I lent myself to aid your purpose, to make it mine. And you have carried it through; next week the Emperor will be crowned. Now I claim the right to return to you; the work is done."

"Gerald——"

"You cannot refuse me that," he cried. "You have taken my life and made it center around you, now you cannot bid me tear that out and go on."

As on their first night together, Stanief stretched his hand across the table for his companion's clasp.

"No," he said lovingly, "we cannot go on without each other, Gerald. If you will stay with a sinking ship, come. But the charge I gave you is not ended, or my purpose yet carried through. You must go back until next week is over."

"The Emperor," Allard began incredulously.

"The Emperor needs you with him more than ever. There are too many people who cling to the peace of the last years, who dread change and would force me upon the throne at any cost. The Empire—not Adrian's court—the vast middle class, the merchants, the quiet, staid aristocracy, the very peasants, want all to continue as it is. If I were still to govern with the Emperor, they would rest content, but they see it will not be so. They fear Adrian, they know and detest Dalmorov and the party he represents. And they are not careful in their methods of getting what they want. Gerald, if you knew the veiled insinuations, the bold offers, the tempters who pursue me day and night—if you knew how they watch the hours when Adrian has been most hard, to renew their whispers and promises, if you lived my life for twenty-four hours, then you might speak of weariness. But the worst——"

Aghast, Allard stared at him, deep after deep of the inner court opening before his dizzy gaze.

"The worst?" he repeated mechanically.

The hand on the table clenched; all the inherited lawlessness and ambition of a royal line blazed up in Stanief's darkly brilliant eyes.

"I want it," he said deliberately. "I want to rule this country, to toss Dalmorov from my path, to stamp out the

satisfaction from these time-serving faces about me. I want to play this splendid game and remain chief in the battles of diplomacy and statecraft. I want my wife to continue in this life to which she was born. And I know the power to accomplish all lies at my hand; I have only to take. Oh, I am no Galahad or Cincinnatus, no patient despiser of earthly good; no longer even the idealist who spun his dreams on the *Nadeja*."

"Yet——" Allard objected.

Stanief leaned back and idly picked up the pen on his desk.

"Yet Adrian's coronation is next week; exactly. Are we sufficiently inconsistent, we others? And I will pass my life in a castle of the north, or wandering over Europe. I only spoke to show you that my days are not serene either, and why you must go back and keep your guard of honor with Adrian. I believe he is safe; the secret police watch him ceaselessly and report to me. But I want you near him."

"I will go back now," said Allard, utterly subdued. "You are right; I knew nothing. I owe him so much, as well as you. I will not leave him again except when he bids me."

"Thank you. You are going direct to the palace?"

"Yes; he sent me with a letter to madame."

Stanief winced and sighed. One trial he had not told Allard, yet exile would have been a light thing to bear if the fearless child Iria had still walked with him.

"Wait, and I will go with you," he offered. "I must have the Emperor's approval of these plans for next week. Have you delivered madame's letter?"

"No, monseigneur."

"Give it to me and I will leave it with her in passing. I have not seen her to-day."

It had come to that; the cold and self-contained Stanief sought a pretext in these days, to see the delicate face he loved. The Gentle Princess was hurting him as no one else could.

Up in her cream-tinted boudoir, Iria was alone when Stanief entered. She was bending over a table heaped with water-lilies and purple Florentine irises from the conservatory, herself quite radiant with their reflected brightness as she lifted the heavy petals and breathed the fragrance. Her back to the door, she did not turn at once to see who came unannounced.

"Look, Marya," she called gladly and sweetly. "Come here; were ever things so lovely? So the irises grew at home, knee-deep in the clear pools like enchanted princes. And the lilies —over them the dragon-flies hovered all day and between their stems the goldfish slept and played."

She moved then, and saw Stanief; a tall soldierly presence in the filigree room.

"Oh," she exclaimed faintly, "pardon, monseigneur!"

"For what?" he demanded. "It is I who should apologize for disturbing you here. I have a letter from the Emperor for you."

"Thank you, monseigneur," she murmured, and accepted the massive envelope to lay it listlessly on the table.

Stanief looked at her. Like one of her own slim flowers she stood, her shimmering white morning-dress leaving her round arms and throat bare. The full, soft hair was caught in a great coil low on her neck, she wore no jewel except the slender gold chain and cross gleaming through the lace at her bosom.

"Why are you afraid of me?" he asked abruptly. "Why do you shrink from me as if my touch was pain? What has come between us, Iria?"

"Nothing, monseigneur." Her fingers interlaced in feverish nervousness.

"Nothing? Iria, Iria, will you tell me now to take you with me into my exile?"

"Yes, monseigneur," came the low reply, but her head drooped.

"And you think I would accept the sacrifice? You think——" he checked himself with a violent effort.

"I am sorry," she responded confusedly. "I—I have not changed."

"Then it is I?"

"No, no; please let me go, monseigneur."

"It is I who go," he answered, shaken out of self-mastery for once. "Iria, I do not know who awakened you, who showed you the truth; perhaps my kindly cousin. But it is clear you have seen. Iria, was your trust also so weak that it went down before a breath? Because I loved you, must you shrink from me? Child, I loved you the first day you gave me your shy friendship, I loved you all the months afterward, and was my care of you less careful for that? If you could have continued in your ignorance, would I have failed you?"

Before his passion and grief she retreated; mute, colorless, her dazed eyes upon him.

"You," she gasped, "you——" then suddenly turned and hid her face among the heaped flowers.

"I did not hope that you could love me, I knew better than that," Stanief said. "But I did hope that you would trust me. I thought I had earned that much, Iria. Let my fancies go; I will undo this so far as I may. You shall stay in the capital, return to your own home; whatever you choose. Only this week remains, and I lay down both my charges. Hush, and rest; this is no fault of yours."

She was sobbing helplessly, her golden head among the white and purple blossoms. He drew a quick breath and stood for an instant, struggling to regather around him the poor tattered cloak of reserve. But it was a relief to him that she could not see his expression when he crossed to her side.

"Forgive me," he said sadly. "I am not very wise to-day, or very kind, I am afraid. I have loved you; yes, and I loved Adrian during our quiet years. Some flaw there must be in me, that neither of you could give me the bare gift of trust. We will speak of this no more; somehow I will find a way for you. 'A Stanief guards his own.'"

His voice shook on the quotation he would have spoken lightly; stooping with the fierceness of pain restrained, he touched his lips to her bright hair.

"You," panted Iria, as the door closed. "You, monseigneur!"

He had gone; only the silver-fringed curtain still swayed to tell her of his passage, the frail feminine atmosphere of the place still quivered from the presence of a dominant energy.

Down in the open carriage—a massively luxurious vehicle with the imperial arms enameled upon the door—Allard waited a long time. The Emperor, just returning from a drive and apparently in haste to have his note reach Iria, had sent his messenger in his own carriage.

"Do you know what one might imagine, to see this carriage here and you waiting in it?" playfully demanded Vasili, as he lounged against the wheel.

"What?"

"That the Emperor was paying a visit to his Royal Highness."

"The regent is coming," Allard warned, gladly seizing an escape from the conversation.

Vasili swung around and clicked his heels together, saluting stiffly. Allard stepped down from the carriage.

"You need not come, Vasili," Stanief remarked, as he took his seat. "Monsieur Allard will accompany me. Come, Gerald; we are late."

The horses sprang forward.

The drive through the streets, gay with preparations for the coronation and crowded with busy people, was attended by the manifestations grown familiar. More eager way was made for Stanief than for the Emperor himself; the glances which followed him were grateful and keenly anxious. Once a girl rose in a passing farmer's cart to toss into the carriage a sheaf of wild flowers.

"Little father of the people!" she cried, in the soft guttural vernacular.

It was a title given only to the emperors, and Stanief flushed and frowned together.

"That will not do," he commented dryly, leaning back in the shade of the victoria top.

The carriage turned from the great square into an avenue leading toward the palace. Densely packed with people, there was a brief pause before an

open path could be cleared. Noting a change in the atmosphere, a chill and more nervous haste, Allard lifted his eyes to his companion.

"This carriage, and you in the shadow, monseigneur," he observed, "they fancy here that it is the Emperor who passes."

The reply was never made. Straight and surely aimed, a missile hurtled from an upper window in one of the buildings and fell on the cushions beside Stanief.

"For peace and freedom!" shrieked a man, leaning from the window in half-insane excitement and waving his arms above his head. "No Adrian—for the Emperor Feodor!"

The crowd grew white with upturned faces; then, comprehending, tumult and panic broke forth. Screaming, frantic, one and all turned to fly from the vicinity of the carriage. Allard snatched the bomb from the seat and rose to fling it from him; but even as he checked himself, Stanief seized his arm.

"Not into the people, Gerald," he ordered sharply. "Better keep it here than that."

"Go, you," Allard implored, turning the smoking object in his hands for examination. "Go, monseigneur."

Above the uproar of the fighting, shrieking mob, rose the agonized cry of the man at the window as he saw the regent's face.

"You? You? The fuse—pull the fuse!"

"Fuse!" echoed Allard, catching a small hanging thread of cotton. "Monseigneur, go, go. I can handle this devil's——"

The cotton broke off short; a steady hissing warned them it still burned inside.

"Give it here," Stanief commanded collectedly. "Get your penknife."

The two men bent above the oval gray message of hate and death. Around them raged indescribable disorder; the very coachman and footman had fled from the carriage.

"If you would go," Allard panted.

"Bah!" said Stanief, and forced the bomb from him.

An ominous snapping came from within. Stanief's strong white fingers fitted themselves to the crack and with a superb effort he twisted the thing in half.

"Ah!" gasped Allard, blinded, as a great cloud of smoke rushed out.

Stanief drew forth the fuse almost as it reached the end, and flung it aside.

"Lit too late," he explained grimly. "Our terrorists are clumsy.

"They meant it for Adrian," he answered. "You were right."

They found each other's hands through the choking fumes; Allard's fingers scorched by the guncotton, Stanief's bruised and bleeding from the force used to destroy the machine.

As the smoke cleared they looked around, and then back at one another. They were alone in a deserted street. Distant cries, spreading tumult through the city, announced the traveling panic. Three blocks away flashed the green and gold of the palace guards as they charged to the scene, over pavements littered with fallen garments, the contents of overturned vehicles, and the vehicles themselves. The well-trained horses of the royal carriage had stood still, accustomed to public demonstrations.

"Really," Allard exclaimed, on the verge of laughter. "Really, monseigneur——"

"There has been some agitation," Stanief assented. "Will you go on to the palace? I am going back to reassure madame."

Their attendants were creeping shamefacedly back, seeing all was over. The line of soldiers swept down upon them, a very pale officer in command.

"I will do," said Allard, "anything you want."

If the uproar had been great at the attack, it trebled as the furious crowds surged back in search of the assailant. The guards were forced to close around the regent to shield him from the frantic and hysterical joy of the people in his escape.

Long before Stanief reached his goal, Allard had arrived at the palace. No less excitement reigned there. Without need of explanation, Allard was hurried

to the Emperor, questioned and congratulated on every side.

He met Adrian in the hall, and at sight of his messenger, blackened with smoke, the Emperor sprang forward and caught his arm.

"Feodor?" he cried fiercely, his voice ringing through the lofty corridor. "Speak, speak; where is Feodor?"

"Sire, he returned to the grand duchess."

"Safe? You are not deceiving me; he is safe?"

"He is unhurt—he destroyed the bomb before it exploded," Allard explained incoherently. "His hands are cut, no more."

Adrian dropped the other's arm and drew back; for hours Allard felt the bruise of that feverish grasp.

"To madame," he repeated.

"Sire, he ordered me to bring an account of the affair to your Imperial Majesty. He can be sent for," Allard suggested eagerly, catching a daring hope from the apparent emotion.

Adrian favored him with a saber-keen glance.

"Why should I wish to see him?" he demanded harshly. "If he is uninjured, very good; we will send our congratulations. You are exhausted, Monsieur Allard; go to your apartments and recover yourself. Alisof," he turned on the group of listeners, "you will inform the Chief of Police that I replace him next week if he completes this exhibition of efficiency by letting the assassin escape. And when the man is captured, he will report to me, not the regent."

Scarlet enough now under the streaks of grime, Allard moved aside to let him pass. All his self-control could not smother the blazing indignation in his gray eyes. But Adrian brushed past without regarding him, and went alone into the room beyond.

CHAPTER XVI.

FIRE LILIES.

Through the uproar, between the crowding people, at last Stanief gained his own hall and partially quelled the tumult by his mere presence.

"Tell madame that I have returned and will visit her when this smoke is removed," was his first direction, on setting foot upon the steps.

But as he reached the head of the great staircase, a white figure flashed down the hall to meet him.

"Monseigneur, monseigneur," moaned the silver voice; before all the household and Adrian's guards, Iria clutched Stanief's stained and blackened coat with small hungry hands and fainted on his breast.

"Stand back," the master commanded as a score of dismayed attendants rushed forward and the Countess Marya sprang toward her mistress.

And lifting her easily in his arms, he carried her back to the cream-tinted boudoir left so shortly before and so nearly left forever.

On the way the gold and topaz eyes opened, but she did not protest or move until Stanief gently set her down.

"Gerald is safe," he said, with a tenderness which had long passed beyond jealousy. "Did they not tell you, dear?"

Iria caught the chair beside her.

"You," she panted. "They said you were hurt. Oh, your hands——"

"It is nothing."

"It is, to me. I thought you would die and never know that I loved you so, monseigneur."

"Iria!" he cried.

She held her hands to him with passionate innocence and grief, the loose sleeves falling back to her shoulders with the gesture.

"I do, I do. Never say those things to me again—never leave me like that."

Dazzled, incredulous, he swept her to him, almost rough in his unbearable doubt and joy.

"And Gerald? What of Gerald?"

"You knew——"

"Knew? Child, you betrayed yourself the first time you spoke of him, the first time I saw you together. Why should I blame you for no fault of yours? How could I blame him, who never even guessed your thought? I never wondered at your choice; only give me the truth."

"But I love you," she said. "Mon-

sieur Allard, I never thought of him like that after our wedding-day. You were so calm, so strong, I just rested with you and found no room for any other. On the voyage from Spain I imagined, somehow, that Monsieur Allard was you—that you had come secretly to meet me—and so I almost forced myself to care for him."

"Love of mine, make no mistake. I want you, my dear, I have wanted you so bitterly long, and you have shrunk from me. You care now, Iria?"

"I have always cared, only I never knew until last year. Since then I have hidden from you because I feared you would see; because I never dreamed *you* cared."

With a tinkling crash the silver pin slipped from her hair, like a golden serpent the heavy coil unwound and fell over his arm, draping them both with rippling silk as he stooped to kiss her quivering lips.

After a moment she stirred, her head still on his arm as she looked up.

"Now you will take me with you," she breathed in delicious content. "Now you will not leave me with the Emperor, Feodor?"

For the first time in many weeks Stanief laughed, reveling in their knit gaze.

"Poor Adrian! How can he punish his rebellious regent, since he must leave me you? In a garden of fire my lily has opened. Where shall we go, Iria, on our golden journey? To your perfumed South?"

"May I choose?"

"You may command."

"Then take me to your own old castle in the hills. Shall it not be home?"

"Hush, you have spoken a word I never knew; let me listen to it for a moment."

Outside, the city roared unheeded, unheard.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN ARABIAN NIGHT.

The Emperor's congratulations and formal inquiries duly arrived, borne by a glittering officer who was so impressed by the coldness of the message entrusted to him that he scarcely raised his eyes during its delivery. He had the misfortune to be attached to the regent.

But Stanief received all unmoved. A clear scarlet burned in his dark cheek, his drowsy eyes were glowing with some inward fire. He had just left the grand duchess and still carried the traces of the recent accident, but he smiled in utter tranquillity as he listened and gave his reply. It was too unaccountable; actually dismayed, the officer retired, and found himself stammering again when he repeated the answering message to the Emperor.

Adrian was at dinner, or rather had just concluded, when he found time to receive the envoy; and he set down his *demi-tasse* to study this embarrassment in a courtier of twenty years' standing. He was always cynically interested in such situations.

"What else did the Grand Duke say?" he demanded.

"Sire, nothing was said except that which I have had the honor to report to your Imperial Majesty."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing, sire."

Adrian made no sign, yet the unfortunate equerry was conscious that he was not believed.

"My cousin appeared well?" came the inquiry.

"Perfectly well, sire; remarkably so."

"I am enchanted to hear it; he has need of steady nerves. That will do."

He pushed away the cup and rose, his glance crossing that of the American near him.

"You almost hate me to-night, Allard?" he questioned softly.

Allard in evening dress, the tiny jeweled star of honor prescribed by etiquette flashing on his coat, was very different in appearance from the smoke-grimed gentleman of noon; but his gray eyes met Adrian's in the same expression with which they had shone from beneath the stains of the conflict.

"Almost, sire," he retorted.

Staggered by the unexpected frankness, Adrian nearly lost his self-possession for the first time in his seven-

"Is this the chauffeur who drives over the limit about once a month?" he asked with genuine aristocratic insolence.

teen autocratic years. But he recovered immediately.

"Thanks for the 'almost,'" he said, with nonchalance. "Just bring my cloak; I want you to go with me."

Amazed at himself, Allard obeyed; humiliatingly aware that he had been scarcely decorous and certainly unwise.

"I beg your pardon, sire," he said seriously, as he offered the cloak.

Adrian surveyed him calmly.

"Was it true?" he queried.

"Almost, sire," Allard confessed.

"Truth is a virtue, at least theoretically, and needs no apology. Moreover I challenged you. Come."

And Allard followed.

In common with Peter the Great and Haroun al Raschid, Adrian occasionally indulged in rambles about his capital, incognito and with Allard for sole companion.

It was a habit only a year old, of which even the omniscient Stanief was ignorant. The Emperor had made it a point of honor with his confidant to guard the secret absolutely, and many a bad hour had Allard suffered in consequence.

Perhaps, being young himself, Allard also had enjoyed the variety and slight peril of these excursions. But then the city had lain quiet under the regent's strong hand, while to-night——

For once he was pleased to see Dalmorov, who rose at their entrance into the salon. At least his presence proved that nothing wholly secret was intended.

"The carriage is ready, baron?" Adrian asked, drawing on his gloves with his leisurely decision of movement.

"It waits at the lower door, sire."

"Very good. Are you ready, Allard?"

"Sire, I do not understand——"

"Well, you have always a coat here, I think."

That was true, and taking a key from his vest pocket Allard silently opened the wardrobe that held their apparel for the auto trips. It was Adrian's affair, not his, if the proceeding awakened Dalmorov's curiosity.

However, the baron's attention was fixed on the master instead of the man; he was watching Adrian with intent and crafty eagerness. He barely glanced at Allard when he came back ready to go out.

"I also may have the honor of accompanying your Imperial Majesty?" he urged.

"No," Adrian returned.

"Sire——"

"No, Dalmorov; I am going alone. Come, Allard."

But Allard stood still.

"Sire, dare I ask where?" he said with firm respect.

"To drive to the cathedral and observe the preparations for next week," was the dry explanation.

"Pardon me yet again; without escort?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps Monsieur Allard disapproves," suggested Dalmorov sarcastically.

"I do," Allard declared, taking a step toward Adrian and throwing back his head obstinately. "It is not fit for the Emperor to go on the streets to-night. Sire, I have talked with Captain Alisof of the Guards and Valiski of the secret police, and it is a seething frenzy of excitement out there. This morning's attack has brought to the surface the most dangerous element in the capital. To-morrow all will be under control, but to-night it is not fit."

"Your affectionate solicitude overwhelms me, Allard," Adrian retorted.

The irony and allusion brought Allard's color, but he maintained his position.

"Sire, I speak a fact. There is real and serious danger in such a drive this evening. I beg you to consider the event of noon."

"I am not Feodor; the attack was on him. Let him keep his house if the people make it necessary."

This of the adored regent, for whom the whole Empire mourned in bitter regret! It was too much.

"Sire, the attack this morning was intended for you," Allard flung with exasperated bluntness. "When the assassin saw the Grand Duke, he shouted directions how to prevent the explosion. It was meant for you, and might be tried again. All the court and city know it."

Adrian stood quite still, looking from one to the other. Aghast at the introduction of rude truth, not venturing to deny what could be so easily proved, Dalmorov found no words.

"For me," the Emperor repeated.

"Yes, sire. And for that I am amazed at Baron Dalmorov's willingness that you should go out."

"It is safe," cried Dalmorov furiously. "If you are afraid, Monsieur Allard, of your own tales, ask to be left here and let me attend his Imperial Majesty."

If the statement had made any impression on Adrian, he shook it off as soon as received.

"So; suppose I adopt that suggestion, Allard?" he remarked.

"Sire, if you go out, I shall have the honor of going also."

"If I choose."

His eyes afire, Allard touched the star upon his coat.

"If this gives me any right to your consideration, sire, you will not refuse me the privilege of accompanying you. I did not speak for myself, indeed I think you scarcely believe so; I spoke because the Imperial carriage will attract every eye and recognition will be certain. There is no one in the Empire for whom the worst districts would be so dangerous to-night, as the brightest avenues will be for you, sire."

"You invited me out into that, baron?" came the incredulous question.

"Because it *is* safe, sire. Because the regent has set the secret police on guard and I——" he checked himself.

The comprehension that rushed to Adrian's expression was far from pleased.

"Ah, I was to go out for a private tour of observation, surrounded by the secret police; all my compliments, Dalmorov. It would doubtless have been safe, if somewhat misleading."

"No, sire——"

"Let me explain, Allard," he went on, mercilessly ignoring the baron's dumb dismay at the exposure of his design before Stanief's friend. "Dalmorov has long been interested in showing me the spirit of the capital, and the necessity for various changes in the government. And regarding to-day as the climax of dissatisfaction with the regent's methods, he proposed a quiet drive through the principal streets as a means of gaging the public feeling. He suggested that I would find such a trip an amusing novelty."

Allard's lip twitched, in spite of his indignant disgust at the intrigues which were dragging Stanief down with myriad nets of cobweb spinning.

"So I consented. The baron felt very strongly the conviction that the people themselves would prove to me the necessity of a different rule at once. Now it seems that his zeal deceived him, and we can very well wait to conclude affairs with dignity next week. That will do, Dalmorov; the loving care which made you surround me with secret guards might also have impelled you to arrange the crowds from which I was to gather my opinion. I shall remain at home to-night. Pray say to the police with whom you and the regent annoy me, and send the carriage back to the stables."

Dalmorov waited an instant for the storm to settle. It was not the first stinging rebuke he had endured from the young autocrat, and he had the consolation of knowing that few or none of the court escaped the same infliction.

"I acted from the purest motives," he began with profound humility. "If my too great anxiety has displeased your Imperial Majesty——"

Adrian turned to him again, his brow quite clear.

"Nothing can really alter my regard for you, my dear baron," he interrupted kindly. "Only do not interfere another time. Go do my errand; I shall spend this evening looking over some plans with Monsieur Allard. Good night."

There was a pause after the door closed. Adrian stood slowly removing

his gloves, which he abstractedly tossed with his overcoat upon the nearest chair, and Allard remained waiting patiently. With the latter's relief at the decision was mingled a vague wonder at the parting glance he had received from Dalmorov. Certainly worsted in the late passage of arms, the baron yet had looked at his antagonist with malevolent and sinister triumph, a distinctly gratified hate. Was it because he divined that the American suffered with Stanief's hurt, and would go with him into voluntary exile? There seemed no other solution, yet——

"Open the wardrobe and take out our wraps," Adrian's matter-of-fact tones broke in upon the reverie. "I will walk to the garage with you, since the palace is watched, instead of having the car brought here."

"Sire?" gasped Allard.

"I told you after dinner that I was going out; I never change my mind. Simply Dalmorov is eliminated. Make haste, please."

In despair of gaining more, Allard obeyed, his brief satisfaction over. Resignedly he assisted Adrian into the long coat and put on his own; finding what comfort he could in the fact that they had taken many such journeys undetected.

In spite of his injunction to make haste, the Emperor did not at once take his cap and gauntlets, but remained dangling his mask by its ribbons and watching his companion's preparations.

"Allard," he said, "you have the faculty of finding yourself in posts of danger and making yourself famous. It is an art, or a destiny, that of being apropos. Three years ago you acquired a scar and star in protecting me; now you have repeated the exploit for Feodor. Come here."

Wondering, Allard turned.

"Pardon, sire," he objected. "I did nothing at all for the Grand Duke. He himself destroyed the bomb; I merely looked on and tried to help."

"Ha? Well, the Grand Duke and the rest of the capital do not agree with you. In the newspapers of several continents you are figuring as an example of self-possessed bravery and devotion to our house—probably you do not care, but the world must have its sensations. And since Feodor cannot give you the tinsel toys which accompany such events, affairs are left in my hands. Bend your head—so."

He had lifted a slender, glittering cordon he himself wore, and deftly threw it around the other's neck with the last word. Completely taken by surprise, Allard had no time for retreat.

"Sire, I would prefer not," he exclaimed decidedly, almost angrily. "I—the Grand Duke is my friend; such things have no place between us. Forgive me, and allow me to decline."

"I do not in the least care whether you prefer or not," Adrian replied with the most perfect indifference. "Or whether you earned it or not. It is simply a question of dignity. This is expected of me, and I refuse to have it said that I place a higher valuation on my own life than on that of—any one else. You will accept, and wear, the order. Of course you do not prize the plaything; neither do I. Shall we go?"

The presentation was sufficiently incongruous, indeed the scene was typical of Adrian himself, in its mingling of medieval and ultra-modern; the two men in their half-opened automobile coats, with beneath the gleam of the quaint, ancient gemmed symbols. And the Emperor added the final touch by picking up the hideous goggled mask and putting it on.

"Let us go," he repeated.

Allard looked down at the pendant Maltese cross of rubies as he buttoned his coat, then caught up gauntlets and cap, and went to open the door.

"Dare I offer my thanks after being so ungracious, sire?" he asked contritely.

"If you choose. But I would rather have you remember in the future that I gave you the decoration *before* we took this drive, not after."

It was useless to endeavor to understand Adrian's enigmatical moods, but that sentence puzzled Allard for many hours, whenever it recurred to him.

The walk to the garage was accomplished as often before. Several times they passed men whom Allard recognized as belonging to the secret service, and doubtless passed many more whom he did not know, all letting the Emperor's favorite go by unquestioned with his companion. But he sighed with relief when they finally reached their goal and he stepped into the low silver-gray machine beside his chauffeur. A man flung back the wide doors, Adrian bent forward with truly professional nonchalance and ease; and they were out in the damp night air.

Through the humming, fevered city they slipped, merely one of many vehicles. The streets were filled with walking people; without destination or object, walking only from consuming restlessness or excitement.

Not to the cathedral did the gray car take its flight, and Allard's amazement reached its culmination when they halted before one of the capital's chief hotels, under the glaring electric lights. For the first time it dawned upon him that there was an object behind the apparent capriciousness of the trip.

"I am to descend?" he hazarded, as his companion did not speak.

"No, you are to wait for me."

"I—you——"

Adrian deliberately stepped out and crossed the bright, crowded sidewalk into the lobby, deigning no explanation whatever. Utterly stupefied, powerless to interfere, Allard stared after him; saw him hand a card to an attendant who advanced, then follow on into an elevator and disappear. The huge hall was filled with chatting men and women, many of them moving in the court or diplomatic circles; to the watcher's excited fancy it seemed impossible that they should not recognize the slight, erect figure, that Adrian's identity cried out from every leisurely movement, every turn of the small imperious head. But presently the attendant returned alone, tranquil and smiling.

It was fully an hour that Allard waited, each of the sixty minutes an hour itself. The climax came with the vibrating roar of another automobile, which fell into silence behind him as Count Rosal came placidly around to greet his friend.

"You, Allard?" he welcomed languidly. "I thought you were on duty every night."

"Not this evening; the Emperor," he recollected the fiction told Dalmorov, "the Emperor is busy with some plans."

"I have been with the regent. Do you believe it, the accident has made him look years younger. But you, you appear rather upset and pale; or else it is these abominable lights."

"It has been a hard day. I am too tired to be amusing, Rosal."

Rosal put his foot on the running-board without the least sign of going away.

He settled his eye-glass, extracted a case of cigarettes which he offered to Allard, and slowly proceeded to light one.

"Tell me," he said confidentially, "is it true that the Emperor took scarcely any interest in the regent's escape?"

"No." He watched a descending elevator with keen anxiety; the fear that Adrian had been decoyed into some trap was becoming unbearable, yet it was impossible to go in search of him.

"They say so at the palace, and all over the city. They say he did not even give a word of praise to you."

Aroused to justice as well as a desire to shield Stanief, Allard withdrew his eyes from the hotel entrance to regard his visitant.

"Does this seem so?" he demanded irritably, and pushed aside his coat to permit a glimpse of the fiery gem he wore.

Rosal's cigarette fell to the pavement; the idle patrician was well skilled in matters heraldic.

"*That!*" he cried, dazed and envious.

Allard shrugged his shoulders and leaned back.

"Were you not going somewhere?" he asked.

"Oh, no, just trying to avoid being bored. Every felicitation, my dear Allard; that is superb. You have nothing to fear from next week, evidently. *Tiens*, here is your man!"

Allard turned sharply, catching his

breath. Rosal, who knew the Emperor well, could he be deceived? Certainly he could not keep the secret if it were learned, not if the mines and sudden death awaited its disclosure.

Adrian came through the vestibule and across the sidewalk with absolute composure. At Rosal he barely glanced, then raised his gloved hand to his cap in the conventional salute to the owner of the machine.

"Good night, Rosal," Allard said pointedly.

Rosal did not move from his position, blocking entrance to the car and contemplating the arrival in mild interest.

"This is the chauffeur who drives over the limit about once a month?" he asked, with genuine continental and aristocratic insolence to a supposed inferior. "My man, do not apply to me for work when your master tires of you; you are too expensive a luxury."

Adrian saluted imperturbably.

"He is English, he understands no French," Allard interposed. "Really, Rosal, I am in haste."

"The Emperor will want you? Alisof told me his Imperial Majesty was particularly difficult to-day, so I do not envy you. He is never facile, eh? Once more, congratulations."

Adrian's white teeth flashed in the electric light as he averted his face from the unconscious Rosal and entered the automobile. He was still smiling under his mask when he sent the machine leaping forward.

"I would have given a good deal to have overheard your unbiased reply to that, Allard," he remarked.

"I fear you would not have been flattered, sire," was the grim answer. "I have spent an unendurable evening. Let me implore you to return to the palace."

"Eventually. Put on your mask; we are going driving."

Allard obeyed in dumb protest.

As if impelled by perversity, Adrian drove through one swarming avenue after another, across the square and down the street where the morning's attack had taken place, swinging finally into the dark, deserted park. Too early in the season, too late at night for promenaders, the quietness here was in vivid contrast to the scenes just left.

Unnoticed by one, the automobile increased its speed; rocking gently from side to side, leaping with catlike softness the inequalities of the road. One might have fancied that the driver also fled from his own thoughts through the empty parkways.

A sharp whistle pierced above the purring whine of the machine, a shouted command. Allard started up, bewildered, and the black mood fell from him as a muffling garment cast aside. They had emerged again into the city, at the same gait.

"The police, sire," he warned reproachfully. "We must stop."

"I will not; let them catch us."

"They will know the car."

"Then we pay the fine. If they threaten worse I will pardon you."

The irony of that might have brought Allard's laugh if he had not been distracted by the view ahead.

"Not possible, sire; there is a regiment crossing at the head of the block. If we are examined——"

Adrian sullenly shut off his power and came to a standstill. He had no desire to have his amusement ended and made an anecdote all over the Empire.

"Tell them you are on my affairs," he directed, as the two pursuing officers galloped toward them, "or anything you choose. I will not go through a police-station farce to-night, do you understand?"

Allard did laugh that time, the relief of waking to reality still tingling in his veins.

"Then I must go alone, if they insist. May I ask to take the driver's seat and claim his responsibility?"

"For what? They would take the automobile. Do you expect me to walk alone to the palace?"

"Good heavens, *no!*" Allard exclaimed vehemently.

The two riders came panting up as Adrian replied with an expressive shrug.

"You are under arrest, *messieurs,*" came the crisp announcement.

Allard leaned out into the light of the street-lamp, taking off his mask and shaking his coat unbuttoned from top to bottom. Perhaps a memory of Rosal's admiration prompted the last move.

"For overspeeding?" he inquired sweetly.

"Certainly; monsieur was going at least forty miles an hour."

"Ah, but my errand was important. I am Monsieur Allard, of the household of his Imperial Majesty——"

Gerald Allard's name was linked with Stanief's on every tongue in the capital, that night. Moreover he stood up as he spoke, and his coat fell back, revealing the confirming glint of jewels and his elaborately careful dress.

"We are desolated, excellency," the man stammered.

"Oh, you were quite right, but I assure you it would be a mistake to carry this further. I am on an errand for—some one not to be questioned. Just fail to remember that you saw me, and there will be no trouble."

He held out a hand in which a yellow coin shone alluringly. The officer coughed, and stooped.

"Yes, excellency. Graciously excuse our stupidity; it is true that the light misled us as to the speed of your excellency's automobile."

"Exactly. Good night."

"Good night, excellency."

"Allard, Allard," drawled Adrian, throwing his levers, "deception and bribery! And under my eyes."

"I obeyed orders, sire," he retorted demurely. "May I drive?"

"*La belle excuse!* However, I admit the coercion. No, you may not drive; I will consider your reputation for the rest of the way."

This time they turned home, at a more modest pace. At the sleepy garage they at last arrived, and left the automobile.

It was but a short block to the palace, and they walked in silence until almost before the door, when Adrian paused for an instant.

"You guard me so carefully, with so much energy, my inconsistent Allard," he observed, the lighter manner of the past hours hardened into his usual coldness. "Have you then not thought what it would mean to your beloved regent if I were removed."

"Sire, if I thought of that it would be to guard you with double care," Allard flashed, shocked and deeply wounded. "Surely I owe so much." And after a moment, recovering a little: "For that matter, even the Baron Dalmorov admits the protection that the regent himself draws around your Imperial Majesty. Sire, if the Grand Duke planned treason, has he not had many opportunities?"

"Are you trying to convince me that some one still exists who has a sense of duty?"

"Perhaps you will credit more readily a sense of honor, sire."

"Perhaps. So it is a point of honor to take care of me?"

"Yes, sire."

When they were once more in the small salon and slipped off their wraps, Allard saw that his companion was rather pale and fatigued. Very kind to him the Emperor had been; the Emperor who next week would send away the only two men who cared for him and stand splendidly desolate in his treacherous court. The pathos of it beat down resentment. And being transparent, Allard's gray eyes betrayed the softened thoughts as they encountered the other's.

"Well?" Adrian questioned, as if to a spoken phrase.

"You will not believe me, sire, but—I would guard you if nothing compelled."

Adrian made a movement of surprise, then smiled with almost his cousin's charming grace.

"Why should I not believe you, who are truth itself? Thank you, Allard."

But the Emperor was not one around whom gentle illusions could long cling, swordlike he slipped through such gauzy fabrics. As they parted for the night he regarded Allard keenly, with even a suggestion of amused cruelty.

"If you have found me indecorously

frivolous to-night, remember how near we are to next week," he said. "It will be a robust sense of honor that survives next week, Allard. You cannot conceive how earnestly I desire my day."

Allard stiffened to rigidity of self-control; comprehending all the allusion to Stanief, he found no reply he dared give.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LAST WEEK.

As the first week of the regency had been, so the last week was a dazzling confusion.

But if this last held all the rejoicing and glory of the commencement of a new reign, it held also the deep regret and dread of the passing of known security. The Empire loved Stanief with passionate fervor, it feared Adrian.

The night before the coronation Allard escaped from the palace and came to Stanief. Adrian had released him earlier than ordinarily, and he was furious before some new arrogance of the victorious party.

"It is Dalmorov again, and always," he declared savagely. "Monseigneur, I never thought myself vindictive, but surely it is time for his reckoning. You once said you would crush him while you could; to-morrow——"

"To-morrow I cannot?" Stanief completed. "That is very true, Gerald; to-morrow I can do nothing. *Sic transit*—you know the rest."

"To-morrow!" Allard exclaimed impetuously. "Monseigneur, monseigneur, it is a quarter to twelve!"

"So late? Well, so I would have the day find us: together. My empire has shrunk to this room, yet left me a universe. For Dalmorov, be satisfied. Down-stairs in my desk are papers which can send him to the mines or a scaffold, as I choose. I have not been idle or forgetful; I thought of you."

"And we waste time! We who count minutes," he sprang to his feet, afire.

Stanief rested his head against the back of his chair, quicting the other's energy with a curious smile.

"My dear Gerald, I have had those papers for two months; two months ago I sent to England the poor wretch who earned his pardon by aiding me to get them."

Stunned, Allard gazed at him.

"Two months!" he repeated. "Two months?"

All the long catalogue of insults, annoyances and petty wrongs rose before him, open warfare and secret insinuations; slowly he gathered comprehension of the singular expression with which Stanief had regarded his rival on such occasions.

"Perhaps I liked to play with him," the level voice resumed. "Perhaps I did not care to deprive the Emperor of his companion while I had still so much work to do. But I think I waited because of a quixotic dislike to using my superior strength against an antagonist; to being both accuser and judge. I am not a child, I have no intention of letting him escape and work mischief undisturbed; simply I leave him to Adrian's justice."

"Then, you——"

"I shall give the evidence to the Emperor after the coronation and before I leave the city. If he chooses to pardon Dalmorov, very good; my part is done. However, I would not value the baron's chances much. My cousin is—my cousin."

"Yes," Allard admitted reluctantly; he too knew the steel-cold Adrian. "Only, it seems a pity to give him to-morrow."

Stanief laughed.

"And I believed you Americans good-natured! Let Dalmorov go with all the glittering wreckage of my regency. I have found the better part."

Iria's snowflake hand nestled in the one held out for it, and there fell a pause. Allard looked at them, then sighing turned his head. The memory of Theodora came to him, who had loved Robert and now grieved out her marred life, alone in the unvalued wealth so hardly bought.

From the great cathedral pealed the first rich bell of the chime. Iria lifted her finger in warning.

"Midnight," she said softly.

Stanief rose, and drawing her with him, crossed to push aside the curtains before the opened window.

"Come," he bade Allard. "The last night is gone. Look at the city, my Gerald; the board of our royal chess, at which I admit checkmate.

"Never did the purple and gold sands slip less regretted from the hour-glass," said Stanief, no faltering in the low tones which an hour before had carried unquestioned dominion over a nation. "Only one sorrow I have to-night, Iria, when with you and Gerald I lay down the life we know."

She leaned closer against his breast, as if to throw her frail body across the gates of destiny.

"And that one, Feodor?"

"Adrian," he answered. "So near to my heart lay the pride in proving my loyalty, in convincing him of it and living down the lying distrust sown by his father and the court. And I dreamed of helping him bear the heavy charge laid on his slim shoulders. I have learned better now."

"The world knows," she whispered, a sob shaking her.

"Yes, or will know. But I loved Adrian."

The quiet words fell with the last distant chime of bells. Listening, it seemed to Allard that no reproach ever leveled at the young Emperor could be so utterly hard to face in the day of account as that wistful phrase.

CHAPTER XIX.

ADRIAN'S DAY.

From the first deafening salute of cannon that ushered in the Emperor's seventeenth birthday, the city was in a tumult indescribable. Cavalry officers galloped through the swarming, flag-draped streets, gorgeous carriages blocked the avenues, marching regiments filled the air with military music.

The morning proceeded, the events pacing on in dignified order. At noon fell a pause, city and court poised on tiptoe—and the magnificent procession moved from the palace toward the cathedral.

It was all of miragelike unsubstantiality to Allard. Adrian, strangely young and collected in his superb medieval robes, surrounded by his glittering nobles; Stanief, hardly less dazzling than the Emperor with the gemmed orders and cordons under which his white uniform almost disappeared; Iria in her fairy royalty—these were the central figures of the pageant. The cheering crowds, the excitement and clamor, were merely a background. But once he met Dalmorov's cruel exultant eyes as the baron smiled across the unconscious Stanief, and there was no more beauty in the scene.

At last the dim richness of the cathedral received them; the cool, twilight of the vast building, the wilderness of columns and lofty jeweled windows.

For all its pomp and solemnity, the ceremony was not long. When at last Adrian turned to face them, fully invested, when church and city rocked with acclamation, Allard felt the first thrill of realization of what this meant. And he knew there was nothing the new sovereign could not do.

He watched the next act in the splendid drama, when as former regent and first kinsman of the Emperor, Stanief moved forward to offer his homage.

"Not here," Allard implored mutely, his eyes on the golden central figure, his hands clenched with nervous dread for the one he loved. "Surely, surely not even Adrian will hurt him here, before these!"

It was over very briefly. As Stanief would have sunk to his knee, Adrian made a quick step forward and prevented the movement.

"Not to me, my cousin," he said quietly. "Not now, at least." And he embraced the other with a touch that lifted the formality to a caress.

The great mass of people remained absolutely still. One would have said there was not a breath drawn or a garment rustled. Stanief himself faltered, shaken out of his stoicism and flushing heavily; it was a moment before he recovered and carried on his rôle.

Allard saw. He saw Stanief's oath of allegiance given and received, he saw the second embrace which welcomed it; he heard the Emperor's graceful speech of thanks for the long service completed now. But no one except Stanief himself caught the murmured answer to the quaint, earnest phrases of feudal loyalty:

"For the second time, Feodor."

The rest of the affair passed rapidly. Adrian took Iria's hands as she came to him and kissed her on both cheeks.

In the departure from the cathedral there came a brief confusion and rearrangement.

"You will ride with me," Adrian said to his late regent, on the steps.

"Sire——"

"Take care; I am too new an autocrat for contradiction."

So Iria went surrounded by her butterfly ladies, and Stanief rode by the Emperor's side during that bewildering return.

The rest of the day, and the state banquet, passed in no less dazzling excitement. But in the midst of all Adrian found an instant to toss a word to Allard.

"Is it almost, or quite, to-day?" he demanded.

Happy, dazed, uncomprehending yet content, Allard met the challenging eyes in an expressive glance; then for the first time in their years together, he impulsively stooped and touched his lips to the slim young hand.

"Not at all, sire," he answered remorsefully.

Adrian's long lustrous eyes opened; perhaps no conquest of the day pleased him more.

"Come to me at five o'clock," he directed, and passed on.

Five o'clock. That hour had been generally accepted through the palace as when the Emperor would withdraw to snatch a brief rest. Somewhat before the time appointed, Allard went to the octagonal library; the room now flooded with quivering pink light from the approaching sunset.

A man turned from a window at his entrance.

"Ah, Monsieur Allard?" said Dalmorov's thin, cutting voice. "Pardon that I derange you, dear monsieur, but the Emperor requested me to meet him here, and so——"

"I am here for the same reason, baron," he explained. "A wonderful day we have had, have we not?"

"Wonderful, indeed," Dalmorov conceded viciously. "But the ides of March have not gone, monsieur."

"What a suggestion for our young Cæsar," Allard deprecated. "Whom do you imagine as Brutus, baron, in our peaceful Empire?"

"You misunderstand; I only pointed out the uncertainty of building upon one day."

Anxiety for Stanief stabbed Allard. Yet his answer was light, and sympathetic:

"Has to-day disappointed you? So sorry, *chèr* baron."

"No, monsieur; for the event of the day I shall most enjoy is just about to take place."

"And my presence threatens to postpone it? It is too bad I cannot do as you suggested, and leave."

"Not at all; it will increase my pleasure to have you here, Monsieur Allard. Meanwhile, the favor of princes is uncertain, and a frail shield."

Again that coldly triumphant glance, the tightening of the lines about the lips. Wilfully Allard misapplied the last sentence.

"Oh, if my poor influence with the Emperor can aid you, baron, you know how I esteem you."

The click of the lock prevented the exasperated Dalmorov's retort. Stanief held open the door, then followed Adrian into the room. There was no distinction of rank in the surprise with which the three men looked at one another, and from one another to the Emperor.

Adrian without his muffling draperies of cloth-of-gold was again the well-known figure of every day.

"Feodor," he said as he moved to the large central table, and the languid

sweetness of his accent was a sufficient warning of danger to those who knew him, "it is unfortunate to be forced to mingle serious affairs with a day already so full, but Baron Dalmorov urges so vigorously the necessity for readjusting the government that I have consented. You will hardly believe that his anxiety leaves neither of us an hour's repose. Will you assist us in this task?"

"If I can, sire," Stanief answered gravely.

"Who else, cousin?" returned Adrian, with exquisite grace. "Who can do so as well? How should the country continue without the wise hand that has guided it through these three years? Pray reassure Baron Dalmorov by telling him that you will still hold in fact the power that nominally you resigned this morning; always aided by my loving support."

Allard grasped the back of a chair; so much even he had never hoped. Stupefied, Dalmorov gazed paling at Adrian; who leaned tranquilly against the table, his lips curved in a very slight, cold smile.

"If you indeed speak seriously, sire, I can have but one reply," Stanief said. "Forgive me for the doubt."

"Since I have taught you it, why not? But the farce is over, the game closed. Dalmorov, pray attend; possibly you also may be interested in the explanation that my cousin asks."

He paused, his lashes fell as if his gaze went back and within. No one moved or spoke as the fire mounted visibly through his calm, shriveling his trained composure and beating against his self-control.

"I love you, my cousin," he said, the quietness forced upon his voice leaving it almost monotonous. "I loved you long ago in my lonely childhood, when your rare visits came like sunny flashes across my dreariness and I used to stand at my window to watch you ride by each day. I had no other affections; I loved you still, however unwillingly, when I went at night to the *Nadeja* three years ago. But you asked me to trust you, and my training had left me no trust to give. Look back to that time, Feodor, for the commencement of the game ended now. Loving you, distrusting all alike, I listened to you when you were with me and listened to your enemies when you were not; striving to reach the fact beneath in the only method I had seen practised. There could not have been a more unequal battle, yet at the end of a year you had won.

"For many months I had held one hope of an answer, Feodor; a limit to uncertainty. 'After the coronation I will know,' I told myself. 'If he lays down the scepter, they have lied.'"

Stanief would have spoken, deeply moved, but Adrian checked him while himself coloring with no less emotion.

"Wait still a little. I ask you to remember that never have I taken one step at the suggestion of your enemies or at the wish of this Dalmorov whom you believed my friend. No one has stood between us; I decided upon my test and made it, it was the trial of faith. No one knew the truth, although Iria and Allard nearly tempted me to confidence. I deprived you of the faintest hope of peace with me. Through it all you moved steadily toward your goal, holding your head above us all. I have learned, at last. If I avoided you, Feodor, it was because I felt my courage failing before yours. If I refused to see you after the accident last week, it was because I was sick with horror at the nearness of losing you, because I was too near to ending the pretense of months just before its climax. And I had set my heart on standing with you, thus, and defying even this man to find an accusation that you have not answered. So," he took a step forward and passed his hand through Stanief's arm, the last reserve swept away by his own vivid energy. "So together; now speak, Dalmorov, before you leave the capital. What selfish motive or hope led the regent to-day when he came to me in the cathedral?

"Nothing?" insisted Adrian, the voice so gentle to his cousin merciless enough now. "Nothing? Feodor, you see my plaything; never again rate me so low as to credit me with such a favorite."

"Sire," interposed Stanief for very compassion, himself unsteadied by the happiness that makes generosity easy.

Adrian turned on him swiftly.

"You? You, Feodor? Oh, it needed but that! Thank the Grand Duke for his intercession, Baron Dalmorov, and go."

The last humiliation was too much. Sallow with defeat and bitter mortification, Dalmorov collected himself to strike the only one within reach; the one through whom he alone could wound the others.

"If it has pleased your Imperial Majesty to misunderstand, I may not say misuse, my devotion, I must submit.

"Yet permit me to give a last service due to respect for my sovereign. My defense I leave to time. This nameless American whom it has pleased his Royal Highness to place near your person, sire, is not fit for such an honor."

"Take care, Dalmorov," Adrian cautioned sternly.

The baron bowed.

"Sire, some months ago chance called me to this investigation. There passed through the city a gentleman who had visited the Californian Allards a year before this man came here. The visitor declared that this was not the Allard he knew, and no member of the family had alluded to another absent one. Naturally anxious and alarmed, I searched further. The officers of the *Nadeja* admitted that no one had seen the new secretary until one night his Royal Highness brought him hurriedly aboard, while the yacht lay opposite an American prison. At the exact hour of his arrival, the alarm was raised on shore of the escape of a convict. It is a singular coincidence, sire."

"It is very uninteresting, baron. What of it?"

"Sire, only loyalty could make me continue. I secured some journals of that date and a little later. The prisoner who escaped was not recaptured; and out in California the gentleman died whose honorable name this man claims. Gime me time, and I can prove that your Imperial Majesty's favorite companion is the prisoner Leroy masquerading as one who is not living to contradict him."

Twice Stanief had moved to speak, and each time the restraining hand on his arm had imposed silence.

"Hush, Feodor; this is my affair," Adrian said, divining the rebellion at this last before it could take speech. "Baron Dalmorov, with time you could no doubt make any proofs you desire; I have seen it done. We close this subject to-day. Are you willing to relieve the baron's cares, Allard?"

So near the truth, and yet so far from it, had the accusation gone. It was not of himself Allard thought at the moment, but of Stanief; Stanief, who had protected him and who must be shielded from the consequence.

"Sire, I am Gerald Allard," he replied, giving that fact with the appeal of sincerity. "The Allard to whom Baron Dalmorov refers was my brother Robert. For the rest, it is perfectly true that I was not in California the year before I came here. The American who did not recognize me was of course my brother's guest during my absence."

"You do not comprehend," Adrian corrected sweetly. "I never intended to ask you to defend yourself against this chain of absurdities. I do not admire your assailant's methods, and I adopt my own. I would ask if both you and Dalmorov will be content with the evidence of a witness who knew the Californian Allards beyond dispute?"

"Certainly, sire," he answered; wondering, yet welcoming any course that led them from New York.

"Sire, if any Californian identifies this man, of course my case fails," conceded Dalmorov with his bitter smile.

"But, it will not be so."

"Pray ring the bell, Allard, twice," directed Adrian.

They waited in silence. Adrian moved to a chair. Stanief sought Allard's eyes with the steadying message of his own, an intensity of reassurance and protection. In reserve he was holding his own power to ruin Dalmorov, and he fiercely reproached himself with not having foreseen and used it before this could have happened.

But Allard showed no agitation to his keen watchers. Now there was nothing he could do; the moment balanced, ready to fall either way at the light touch of chance. Quietly, with a dignity all unconscious, he waited the judgment.

A rustle of silken garments, a silver echo of the Southern voice as the door opened, and Iría was in the room. Iría, flushed, smiling; and by her side a girl in white whom two of those present had never seen. As the duchess swept her graceful salute to the Emperor, Allard's cry rang through the place:

"Theodora! Theodora!"

The girl held out her hands as he sprang forward to clasp them.

Smiling, Adrian moved forward a chair for Iría; whispering a phrase in passing which sent the light blushes to her forehead as she glanced shyly at Stanief. Then, Theodora slipping her fingers from Allard's with confused recollection of their situation, the Emperor claimed her attention.

"Mademoiselle Leslie, let me present to you the Baron Sergius Dalmorov, formerly of this court. And, since he appears suffering under a strange misconception, do me the favor of informing him who is the gentleman whom you have just greeted."

"Monsieur le Baron, I am charmed," she said in her pretty, hesitating French. "This is my cousin, Gerald Leslie Allard, whom I have not seen for many years. We grew up together; and in the pleasure of meeting him again——"

"Thank you, mademoiselle," interposed Adrian. "Let me complete the aid to your halting memory, Dalmorov, and recall in Monsieur Allard my loyal friend of three years' trial; the gentleman who bears the scar and the decorations gained in defense of my life and my cousin's. Several months ago you first hinted at this attack upon him. Knowing you very well, I obtained the necessary details from him under a pretext, and myself wrote to Madame Leslie suggesting that she bring mademoiselle here for the coronation. A week ago they arrived at the Hôtel Anglais, where I had the pleasure of visiting them one evening. We explained a few details to one another; since then they have been the guests of the Grand Duchess, who promised me secrecy."

"I did not even tell you, Feodor," murmured Iría plaintively.

"Feodor will forgive you," assured Adrian. "Baron Dalmorov, you have our permission to retire from the capital at once; you are not suited for court life. You may go, and in future avoid the same city with me. That is all; I have waited a long while for to-day."

Stanief turned to Allard, then expressively regarded the man who moved almost gropingly toward the door.

"Shall I give the excuse?" the glance asked.

And Allard's impulsive gesture answered.

"Has he not enough?" flashed the mute return.

The door closed gently.

CHAPTER XX.

CLOSED.

Beyond the marble arches was the brilliancy, the color and movement of the vast ballroom; here, the perfumed dusk of the conservatory's mimic garden, lit by tiny jeweled lamps hung among the flowers. And over both atmospheres the dreamlike enchantment of the strange national music that Adrian loved. Sighing, Allard leaned forward, his eyes reveling in contemplation of the girl opposite.

"To see you like this! Theodora, I have so sorrowfully pictured you as changed, as grieved and saddened out of the brightness I so longed to keep for you. And you are the same, always the same, dear."

She smiled, half tenderly, half in indulgent mockery.

"But I am not the same, nor are you, Gerald. I am twenty-five instead of nineteen, and wiser than Theo Leslie

used to be. When I see you moving through this court with so much ease, in all your gorgeousness so naturally worn," she made a laughing gesture to the gemmed orders, "I think—I think perhaps it is well we have both grown."

The truth of the judgment held him.

"If we have grown nearer, Theo?"

"I tried to say—that. Can you guess how mama and I have followed you through scattered newspaper articles and items of European news? How we rejoiced and cried together when you saved the Emperor from death and were yourself wounded, when your name was everywhere? You wrote so seldom, and never to me."

"I thought you must hate me for leaving Robert; I never forgot that."

Her vivid face grew serious, her eyes fell to the fan in her lap.

"I could never have felt so, whatever you had done. Gerald, the last morning he spoke to us, Robert said that you had made a sacrifice we could not conceive. He told us that we must never question you or seek to know, but that you were above all blame."

"There was never one like Robert," he said, gratitude a pain. "Theodora, I never wondered that you loved him."

She stirred, and very soft were the eyes she lifted to his.

"I did not love him as you meant. Gerald, Gerald, you were wrong."

The conservatory wavered before his gaze; he rose impetuously and she also.

"Wrong? Then——"

"You, Gerald. Oh, could you not tell a girl's playmate from her lover? Robert read the truth; and I believe he was glad. Gerald——"

Slowly, almost fearfully, he drew her to his arms.

"Wrong! Oh, Theo, it has all been wrong, and the fault mine. That out of it all should come to-day, my dear, my dear."

"Do you know how I found courage to tell you this, Gerald?"

"You knew I loved you all my life."

"But it was so long, so very long; you might have forgotten or changed. No, it was because the night he came to our hotel, the Emperor told me that you cared for me still."

"When we do wrong, sometimes we are allowed to make our payment, if we try," he said dreamily.

"You have the man's justice, Gerald; now learn the woman's art of graciousness. Unquestioningly let us accept our gifts."

"It is that! Thank you, Theo. The account is closed; the rest—*commences.*"

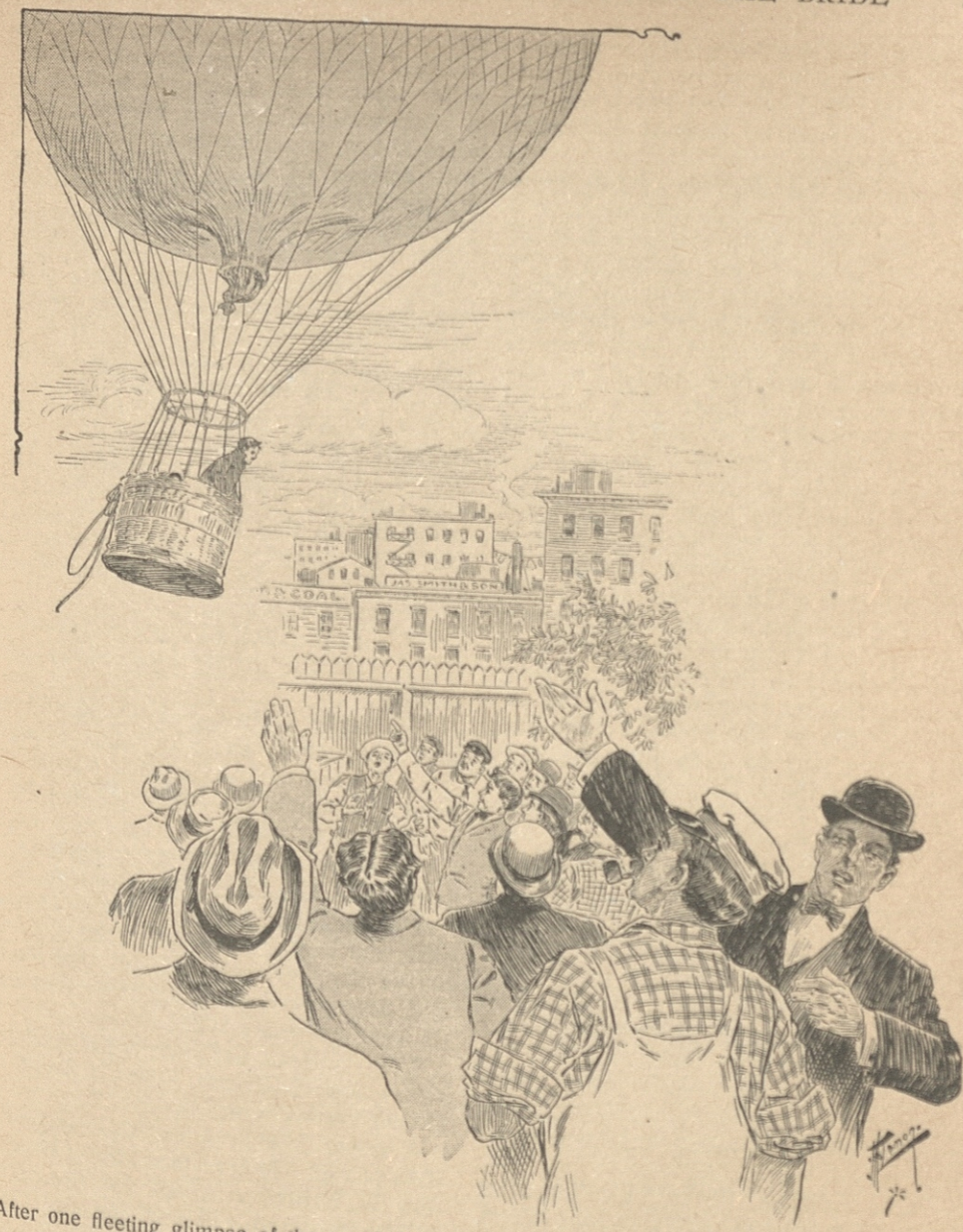
THE BURGLAR, THE BALLOON, AND THE BRIDE.

BY LOREN PALMER.

"LET her go!" I yelled, and then the earth dropped away. I hung on tight and looked up at the huge balloon overhead, trying to collect my thoughts.

I got a fair collection of 'em after a time and, as it occurred to me that the basket in which I was seated was perfectly steady, I let go my hold, tore my eyes from the orb of the balloon and ventured a peep over the side.

The first look made me gasp. Everything was so small and far away; but the beauty of the picture overcame my fears and I continued to gaze, fascinated by the great expanse of country which lay spread out like a map beneath my eyes.



After one fleeting glimpse of the startled faces of the real balloonist and McCarthy, I found myself sailing over the housetops.

It was a mighty restful change from the strenuous half-hour before, during which I had fled from the agile policeman only to run into McCarthy—and with the diamonds still in my pocket. The diamonds, indeed, were the cause of all my present troubles. Their very twinkle on a fat old dowager's neck as she passed through the doors of the Metropolitan to her carriage, had been too great a temptation. The theft of the Ortez gems twelve months before had supplied me with sufficient funds, and more than enough newspaper no-